

# University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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## Coach Kirk Ferentz

### Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: It was a good win Friday night for us. Feels like it was about a week ago, but it's good to get off to a positive start in Big Ten play. We always want to do that.

As I said the other night, watching the tape, we saw some growth from our football team, had our challenges in the first half, certainly. Those guys did a great job with their game plan and execution.

But the good news is special teams offense kept us in the game. We were able to tie it up at halftime and played better in the second half, so good to get off to a good start and get the win.

Just a good example of good team football by our guys going out there and executing.

Also, I want to congratulate Kaden Wetjen for two weeks in a row being mentioned as a Big Ten Special Teams Player of the Week. He's done a great job, having a great year, and is aggressive back there in the return game. Credit to the guys blocking on top of it.

Turning our sights to Indiana, obviously a really good football team, certainly worthy of its ranking. They come in 4-0 and playing with a lot of momentum.

Captains this week are the same guys: Koen Entringer, Ethan Hurkett, Logan Jones and Mark Gronowski.

Then medically, Jaz will not make the game, so Patterson is out this week, and we'll see how that goes as we move forward.

As I said, Indiana is a really good football team. Anybody that saw the game Saturday, you couldn't help but be impressed. Really played well. Had a great year last year. We didn't play them last year, but you watch them on exchange tapes, they kept popping up. So impressed with the way they played. Good personnel.

Coach Cignetti has come in and done a great job. Really

upgraded their personnel last year, and beyond that they're really well-coached. You didn't see a game where they didn't play hard and look like a really good football team.

From my vantage point I think they're a better football team this year. They've upgraded even more with their personnel, done a good job with the transfer portal, and also developing the guys that they have on their roster.

They're playing at a high level right now. Didn't look like they had a flaw the other night at all. A really strong performance. It's pretty much been that way all season long. Every game they've been in, they've been winning very decisively. Just extremely impressed. Coach Cignetti and his entire staff, and most of those guys came with him from James Madison. They have an identity, got a plan, and it's worked out very well. A big challenge for us there.

A couple words about our Kid Captain; Jaxton Engstrom is our young guy this week, a 17-year-old from Waterloo, and was diagnosed early with a rare brain disease called Batten, so he's certainly fought through his challenges and done a really good job and basically defied the medical experts in some way and is a senior at Waterloo West right now and his parents say just a young guy that generates positivity on a daily basis.

Great to have them with us on Saturday and be in Kinnick, and look forward to that.

Last but not least, good to be home. It was a late trip Friday night. Good to be back home, and good to be in Kinnick. It's going to be a great atmosphere, and they have a lot of activities around the '85 team is being honored and Homecoming. A lot of things outside the building, outside of the stadium, but most importantly, a big challenge for us, and look forward getting ready for that.

**Q. The difference between Mark Gronowski in the passing game from week 1 to last week, it's pretty evident. From your vantage point, where have you seen them take that next continued step forward, and it just seems like Mark is playing with supreme confidence right now compared to maybe that first game against UAlbany?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, first games are tough for everybody typically, every player on the roster, but



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certainly somebody that hasn't been in the program, and he missed spring ball, and I don't want to minimize that at all. I don't think you can minimize it.

Especially with our offense there's a lot of verbiage, a lot of things going on, so it takes time to get acclimatized a little bit, and with each week he's more and more comfortable running the ball, operating, leading the team out there. It's been good to watch him grow with confidence. Not surprised by that. He's a really high-quality guy.

But you can't overstate the importance of practice and repetition. True in any offense certainly, but for what we do, I think it's really important for him.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about running back with Jaz out. Is it Kamari and then McNeil, Washington?**

KIRK FERENTZ: The few, the proud, the free. Whoever is healthy is in there. We have Kamari back. He looked really good the other night, and he's doing great. T.J. certainly is ready to roll, and then Nathan would be the next guy up. That's pretty much where we're at right now. We'll play with the guys we have.

**Q. Is Doll out again this week?**

KIRK FERENTZ: He will be available for depth, but he just started practicing yesterday. He's missed a lot of time.

**Q. Jaylen Watson got in the last couple series. Phil put him in instead of Deshaun Lee. Where do things stand at that second cornerback position for you guys?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I think competitive. It's a little bit like last year, we're rotating guys a little bit, too. T.J. right now is the most experienced and has taken a good step, and Deshaun has done a lot of good things, too. There's a lot of big challenges out there. I thought somebody should have had Joe Anderson mimic No. 9 last week in practice. He was probably about the closest guy we have to him. He's more impressive in person than he was on tape even.

But all three of those guys will be playing. Really happy with Deshaun. Deshaun has done a great job, and we have high hopes for Jaylen, too, so those are our top three guys, and we'll probably rotate them all through. It's another great group of receivers, so it's a big challenge for us.

**Q. I wanted to ask about Curt Cignetti's quick rise and turnaround for this program. Have you ever seen a head coach be able to make that kind of adjustment for a program like Indiana and bring it to national spotlight**

**like this?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I'd have to think long and hard if anybody has done it. It's been very impressive. Part of it is we're in a new era, if you will, where it's a little different when a coach comes in because of the portal. New coaches now can basically clear their roster out, if they choose. I'm not suggesting he did that. Then the players can transfer pretty freely.

What I'm impressed with is how many players came from JMU. I think it was in the teens last year. We didn't play them, but I think I heard like 13, 15, something like that. But I do know this: the first bye week we had last year, I can't remember who they were playing, I was kind of flipping channels and was like, I don't know who that 13 guy is, and I looked it up, and it was a guy from JMU. A lot of their best players are guys that came from there.

I think that's two things. Everybody always worries about recruiting. A lot of those guys that played for him at JMU I'm sure weren't recruited by Power Four schools, yet they're playing power football right now. 13, I mentioned him. Two of their best defensive linemen, in my opinion, are guys that played for him. They have a couple linebackers that played for him.

A lot of those guys did a good job, but the fact that those guys came with him and really gave them a good foundation, they went out and got a good quarterback from the Ohio University, a grad transfer, I believe last year. So you have more available to you in today's age when you switch coaches.

I'm not minimizing the job they've done there as a coaching staff and the players that were there last year and the ones this year. It's really impressive. And then I'll just rattle down the road here a little bit, but one of my curiosities is when you make big roster changes, how do you get guys to play cohesively, and they've done that. They did it last year and they're doing it right now, too, with a lot of new players again. That's really impressive. That's good coaching. They clearly have a vision of what they want to be, and it looks like it's working really well for them.

**Q. Indiana is putting up some pretty gaudy offensive numbers. What are the biggest challenges that they present to your defense?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Where do you want to start? It's hard to find a weakness. It really is. I'm not saying it's like playing Ohio State, but there's some similarities in my mind if you look at their offense. They have a big, physical offensive line, a couple newcomers there that have helped them. Right tackle, center, I'll start right there. I think the other



three guys were there last year, although I think one of them was a transfer as well, maybe, a year ago. But they're a big, physical offensive line, two tight ends that are very effective and the one guy made the big play the other night with the long touchdown. Then those three receivers as a group -- they're all really good individually, but as a group, it kind of takes you back to Ohio State, where pick your poison. They had two first-rounders and another guy is pretty good.

You've got that, and then in the backfield they have two really good running backs right now, and then the quarterback might be the best quarterback in the country. Somebody was saying he's the leader for the Heisman. I don't have a Heisman vote, but I'd vote for him based on what I have seen. He looks really good, too.

I think that's part of why they're putting up those numbers. They can run the ball, pass it, got the ability to hit the big play. The quarterback, I'll go back to him for a second. He gets the ball out extremely quick. It's going to be tough to even get a hand on him, and he'll run it, but when he runs it, they have designed runs for him and then they also have -- he'll flush it out, but he's looking down, he'll look to maybe a throw on the run, which is tough to defend.

Then on top of it, they're playing really good on defense. They're very aggressive, and they're good at playing with a lead, which they've pretty much been doing all season long.

I forgot about special teams, right? First touchdown was a blocked punt. Other than that, there's no problem. (Laughter.)

**Q. Coach, you're 0-10 in your last 10 against ranked teams. What do you have to do differently this weekend to get a win?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably score more points than whoever it is we're playing. That's about as good as I can do on that one.

**Q. Seth Anderson, will he be available?**

KIRK FERENTZ: As far as I know, yeah, he's practiced the last two days, so hope to have him out there.

**Q. Just curious, Rutgers, the way they were able to pass it in the first quarter, first half, how much was that you guys versus what they were doing in the passing offense? What was your diagnosis of that?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, it wasn't perfect. I thought their execution was pretty much flawless. The quarterback was

doing a great job putting the ball where he had to. I mentioned their receivers, but the bad news is we have a similar challenge here. This quarterback is probably a better thrower, and the receivers aren't as tall in 9 and 8, but 13 is a tall guy. He's got good size. But they're all good players.

We're going to have to do a better job. We did a better job in the second half, disrupted them a little bit better. You have to do a lot of the little detailed stuff that maybe we weren't doing well in that first half, which gave them access to makeable plays, and then their execution was excellent. I would expect based on what we see out of Indiana that their execution is really good in the passing game, too.

We're going to have to try to find a way to disrupt things a little bit, but like I said, getting to the quarterback is tough. He gets the ball out really quickly. A lot of challenges there.

**Q. Is Reece Vander Zee still on track to return after the bye week?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I hope so. I'll know more when we get back in next week, but I hope so.

**Q. On Dayton Howard, that 42-yard catch, what have you seen from him? It seems like now he's starting to get some more runs, he's improved as a blocker, but he just has different physical attributes than some of the other receivers and a big downfield threat. What have you seen from him?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I think I said this before the season. The first four or five weeks, or in this case this season it's a five-week block, you learn a lot about your team because our teams tend to develop and grow a little bit, even your older guys. You need your best guys, older guys to play their best, and we have examples of that where some of our veteran guys are really playing at a good level and doing a lot of good things.

But yeah, you hope there are going to be some younger guys stepping up and making progress and getting that confidence they need to play well. That was obviously a big play in the game the other night from a team standpoint, but I hope it was a big play for him as a personal because sometimes you just have to gain confidence by doing something pretty special in the game.

I thought he did that. That was a great effort on his part, great concentration, and that point of the game is really where things turned a little bit for us. That was a huge play in the game. I'm hoping that will give him the confidence because he lacks a little bit of experience, a little bit of



confidence like a lot of players that haven't played a lot.

**Q. You mentioned after the Rutgers win that that was the kind of game that really builds confidence as you head into Big Ten play for the rest of the season. Obviously you weren't expecting Indiana to put up 63 points against Illinois, but knowing that was the immediate aftermath, how does that win against Rutgers continue to re-emphasize the confidence boost of a win like that?**

KIRK FERENTZ: We've played four games and two of them came down to really tight margins. We came up short the first time, and then at least the other night, to fight back and stay in the game and then take it over a little bit in the fourth quarter, that's typically how it is in conference play. You're going to have a lot of games like that, more games that way than not.

Every step you can take, it's a positive. If you can learn something plus have a positive result, that's a really big benefit for you. I can't think of any championship seasons I've been involved with where -- I'll go back to '02, it looked like we were hitting stride and then the state of Indiana wore us out, Purdue out here, and then probably the toughest game of the year was Indiana. I think we had to pick off three in the red zone against a team I'm pretty sure that hadn't won a game yet. It's just in conference play, you never know when it's going to be or what's going to happen each and every week, as much as we all try to predict.

Just that mental training for a team to go through it and have to do it when it's hard, that's a really good thing, and hopefully you accumulate that kind of stuff as you go along and become a little bit better of a football team.

**Q. The last two games you've been aggressive coming out of the gate with some downfield throws. That's been a little bit different. How comfortable are you with that at this point, seeing that two weeks in a row, and knowing you're probably going to have to score a lot of points to win?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think your plans are typically based around your players and then your opponent. I mean, we'd always prefer to be aggressive, but you just have to do what's smartest, too. You have to try to give yourself every opportunity to be in a game.

Yeah, looking at our opponent right now, they basically have taken charge real quickly in all their games, triggered it with a special teams play last week, get the blocked punt for a touchdown, and next thing you know they score and they're up 14 whatever it was, I guess 14-7 maybe. But

then that second quarter was really a big quarter. They really executed flawlessly and then it kept on going.

We're going to have to really be aggressive, be smart but not reckless either. You can't be reckless because you give these guys a short field, that's probably not a great play either. You kind of judge the situation and gauge it, but we'd prefer to be a little bit more aggressive if we could, any time.

**Q. Curt Cignetti said that I think he was a GA at Pitt a few years after you were and maybe crossed paths. Is there anything you recall from coming across him then and anytime over the years?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Truth be told, I'm older than him (laughing). But I'm more familiar with his dad. His dad was very well-known in western Pennsylvania and coached at West Virginia but had a long great career at Indiana, PA. So familiar with him.

To his point, he followed me by two years, I guess, at Pitt, two or three. I think he was there two years. When I was here coaching, every spring break I'd get in the car and we'd go back to Pittsburgh. Both Mary and I's families were there, so we'd split time and I'd just go down to Pitt every day because it worked out timing-wise. They'd always start spring ball ahead of us, so I got to go down there and watch them practice, whatever it was, three, four times a week. So you get to meet everybody pretty much on the staff at that point. But I was there mainly to spend time with Coach Moore. That's kind of what we did.

**Q. Some of your offensive players were talking about how proud they were that they were the reason or at least one of the main reasons why you guys won the game. What does their finish and that comeback show you about what they're capable of?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think we're in a little better shape maybe, but I'll go back a couple years ago, we won four straight there at the end of the season two seasons ago to put our 10th win up. We were more a defensive-oriented team, much like we were in '81. I'll date myself. But that's the way that team was built.

But I would also suggest or argue the offense did what they had to do to be successful. I remember hitting a big inside play, Leshon Williams against Nebraska, and I think we were in a counter against Illinois to put the ball in position to get a winning field goal. So you do what you've got to do to win games, and that's really how we were wired.

But I think we have a chance now to hopefully be a team that can score a little bit more than we have the last couple





years. That's been part of the goal.

But it's kind of an accumulation of a lot of things. You've got to have a linebacker that can block. You've got to be a quarterback that can operate. I think we're probably a little bit better at our receiver position, and we've had good backs, but I think we've got a good group right now, so hopefully we have enough balance where we can make them have to defend us a couple different ways and then find some ways to come up with some points, enough to win with.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about the '85 team being back this weekend and just some of your memories of that team and that year. It was pretty special in Iowa football history.**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it was just unreal. I talked to Dan McCarney the other day about it on Saturday during our off day. A lot of great memories from a coaching standpoint, from the players. It was kind of a storybook year, if you will. We had a couple tough ones that year. I think Indiana was one that year, as a matter of fact.

You have those highs and lows in a season, but the team just kept working. Great group of guys. Again, not a lot of guys were high recruits but just guys that were really good players. It was such a cohesive group. Coach Fry kind of set the vision for everything, and it was just an unbelievable season.

You talk about players like Chuck Long, Ronnie Harmon, we had a pretty salty lineup there, good tight ends, enough at every position. Bill Happel was a great receiver. Enough at every position, and our defense was pretty darned tough and good on special teams. Those are those three things kind of consistent to winning teams. If you can get all that working together, you've got a shot.

The Michigan game was an electric environment, maybe as good as I've ever been in at any level at any time.

It was kind of a long road, then for a guy like Dan McCarney, who played here, grew up here and played here, I think the appreciation is even deeper because he knew what it was like for those, whatever, 19 years prior to. Yeah, pretty cool. It's great to have those guys back. They're going to have a hell of a time. I'm sure I won't. I won't even see them. But they're going to have a hell of a time. I'd encourage them, but they don't need encouragement knowing those guys. Good for them. That's how it's supposed to be. That's how it's supposed to be.

**Q. Kaden Wetjen is a massive weapon for you on**

**special teams. Does he have the green light as far as can he make the decision if the ball is deep in the end zone or do you try to hold him back because he's such a weapon where you want to use him? I know some other players you may say, don't worry about returning it, but does he have the green light?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Not total green light. We don't want to be stupid. I'm glad you brought that up. Probably won't get many opportunities with the guys they have, who actually is from Nebraska, actually, their kicker. But boy, he puts it in there deep and he puts it up there pretty high.

Just got done telling our guys this morning, we probably won't get many opportunities, maybe a little window to factor in or something like that. I can't imagine they're going to kick it where he could intentionally return it, so this may not be a great week. But you don't want to do something that's stupid. You can't start on your own 15.

But to flip it around, though, if he gets an opportunity to go, we want him to go. You might give him a little bit more liberty in the punt return game than you would a normal guy.

There's been times where I've debated should we even bring it out on the kick return portion, but right now it's not a debate. It's another offensive play if we can get the ball in his hands.

I'll finish up, too, getting more comfortable with him. Again, he's an example of a guy who's so much better than he was two years ago. He was a good player two years ago. I'm not knocking it. But just the experience and actually playing in Big Ten competition, really, good players grow from that, and that's what he's done, so it's been fun to watch him play and compete.

**Q. A couple players over the last couple weeks, Logan, Dayton, Seth, have all talked about Mark's fire on the sidelines after a really good drive and continuing to encourage his guys and maybe showcase a little bit more emotion than he does when he's speaking with us. Is there any former player or quarterback that his leadership style and fire reminds you of, or is he just continuing to craft his leadership style with this year's group?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, you might imagine, like Drew Tate had his moments. Kind of interesting, as you might imagine. But it's all based on personality. I think it's like anything you do in life; you have to be who you have and you have to do it within the framework of how you are. So for him, it's authentic. He is an underdog story. Nobody recruiting him out of high school, at least nobody to my



knowledge in the Big Ten or the MAAC. I'm sure he's got a chip on his shoulder. But he's worked extremely hard. That's very clear the last four years. You can tell he's done it in the classroom, and he's done it certainly as a football player.

These games mean a lot to him. The personalities are different for everybody. Brad Banks never showed any emotion and barely said a word, and everybody followed him. They'd follow him right off a cliff. So there's different ways of projecting your leadership, I think, and Mark has got his way of doing it, and it comes off really well, but it's all genuine.

You talk about quarterbacks, but it's true at any position, it's more about the doing than it is the talking, no matter -- there's a lot of guys that can talk but not all of them can do it or have done it, and Mark has done it, so he's certainly earned everybody's respect here.

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