

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, October 7, 2025

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference

KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon, everybody. I'll talk a little bit about the bye, then obviously the game Saturday at Wisconsin.

The bye came at a good time. It's a welcome break for everybody. It's good to have two of them in the schedule, actually. Had four weeks of camp, five straight games. I think this was good for the team. They have a chance to get back and regroup a little bit, recharge. Also the younger guys that haven't played, got to work with them a little bit more extensively, get them working in the system offensively, defensively and special teams. Hopefully we made some progress.

One thing I told those guys is there's certainly going to be some guys in those groups that will be at some point playing in the next three weeks or the last four weeks of the season. Moving forward is always an important thing.

The special benefit was we got to get out Friday, do some recruiting. It's always fun to go to games on Friday nights. Something that I really miss. High school football on Friday nights is special. Good to have that opportunity.

Looking ahead at the Wisconsin game. Our four captains remain the same: Hurkett, Entringer, Gronowski and Jones.

Injury-wise, we don't see Jaz coming back (Saturday). I don't think that's going to be a possibility. Then T.J. Washington probably won't make it either.

Jaden (Harrell) came out of the game last time we played. Don't see him being back either. Pretty sure those guys will all be out.

Positive side, looks like (Reece) Vander Zee is going to have a chance to get back, if he can make it through the week. The same thing with Xavier Williams. Looks like he's healthy after two days. We'll see what this looks like.

Regarding Mark, so far so good. It's been encouraging. He's gotten some good work in. A week ago, I wasn't so



optimistic. We'll take it as it goes this week.

Right now, we're working all three of the guys. He worked well today, so we'll see how it all goes along as we move along here.

Talking about Wisconsin, typically really no different like a lot of the last 20-plus years. They're a big, physical team, strong team. I expect it to be another tough Big Ten road game.

The fact that they've moved it to a night game makes it even more of a challenge. It seems to be the way it is in college football right now. We expect a real tough contest.

Offensively, probably the biggest difference is that Coach Fickell has been there a couple years now. Defensively, they look pretty much like they did, except different personnel. Offensively, they have a new system. They've been dealing with the quarterback rotation as well. Injuries had factored into their play.

Looks to me like, again, just TV scouting and watching from afar, looked like Saturday they kind of settled in and found a little bit of a home base there. It looked typical Wisconsin. Ran the ball really well. Big, strong guys up front. They've had some injuries on the line, have some road guys rotating. Looked like they settled in pretty well there. Did a nice job. The quarterback did a good job. You never know what to expect, but that's the line as they move forward.

Defensively, I think the biggest change is their personnel, a lot of new faces. A couple of guys graduated. They went out and loaded up with some new, more mature guys on the defensive front. The front seven right now, they're a bigger, stronger group. Playing really well. Playing aggressively. We'll have our work cut out for us there, for sure.

Again, it's never been easy going up to Madison day or night. Certainly playing a night game, it's going to be a big challenge for us. The last time was in 2007. Expect it to be tough. Last time we were there, it was a late afternoon game.

One thing that's consistent, their crowds, it's a tough place to play. You're playing a good football team. That's what

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we're looking at there.

The Kid Captain this week is Lily Sebastian. She's a young lady from Cedar Rapids. She and her twin sister were both born prematurely, 31 and a half weeks. Lily was two pounds and four ounces at birth. Got some developmental challenges. Had surgery on the first day of her life. Basically surgeries pretty periodically through age five. Some real challenges early. Her sister has been a month in the NICU. Lily spent 299 days there herself. Tough start.

But she's doing great. Seventh grader. A 12-year-old who is a seventh grader up in Cedar Rapids. Sounds like she's got a real good spirit. We'll be thinking about her on Saturday. Glad to be representing her.

It will be a tough challenge for us going on the road playing a night game. Tough environment against a good football team that typically when our two teams match up, it's a hotly contested game. A lot on the line certainly. We'll try to finish up this week and have a good week of preparation.

Q. Can you describe what the last week or so has been for Mark in terms of his rehab, recovery? Was he a full go today or just kind of slowly working back?

KIRK FERENTZ: He basically practiced. We weren't running quarterback runs or anything like that. He had a normal day. I don't know if his car is out there right now, but I see it out there a lot. At least I have the last nine days. He's in the building an awful lot. He's wearing out the training staff.

Testing came back positive. That's the most important thing.

Basically it's what he can do, how fast he can progress. I know he's doing every bit he can from that standpoint. The medical staff's doing a great job working with him. Pleasantly surprised, quite frankly. Not saying I wasn't going to be optimistic, but you're always concerned when a guy has an injury.

Q. The change at the backup position with the either/or kind of for Hank and Hecklinski. What have you seen from Hecklinski? What initiated that change in the status there?

KIRK FERENTZ: As you can imagine, last week Mark didn't do anything with football. He didn't get any snaps. We took all the reps that we did have and divided up those two guys. We're going to let those guys compete. Really with all three of them now, it's who looks best by Friday,

that's who will start the game. It's a pretty open competition. Hank has done a really nice job. Jeremy has been impressive. In season it's tough to give three guys reps. It's hard to do.

With the bye week, that gave us a chance for all the guys to compete. I think both guys look good. They're different quarterbacks. They have different strengths. You just never know.

We'll see how it all shakes out.

Q. In the reps that Hank and Jeremy were able to get during the bye week, kind of provide some insight into what you saw from each of them.

KIRK FERENTZ: I thought they both did well. Hank's got the inside track, if you will, in that he's been here longer. Went through the entire spring ball, so he got a really good jump systematically. Jeremy has done a good job with it. Obviously, Mark has done a good job, too.

It's a healthy room. Pardon the pun. Going back to last couple years, it's a better situation right now where guys have a good grip of what we're doing. I think all three of them are capable of doing some good things with our team.

Obviously, you would like to have your starter. Mark is the starter right now. We'll see how they all do. But they're all making good progress.

Q. Regarding Reece, has he been a full go this week? Is it kind of wait and make sure he's healthy by the end of the week? How important is it to get him back?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not expecting him to light the world on fire this week, if he does play. Basically it's been a gradual, slow-gradual process. Type of injury he had just required flat-out rest. He was in a walking boot for I don't know how long. Seemed like forever. That is what it is. You have to be patient there.

Last week he was able to do running on ground, worked with the strength staff, that type of thing. Nothing football-wise really. Then this week he's starting to work back a little bit. His volume of work right now, he's missed a lot of time, so he couldn't go out there and play meaningful snaps.

At least if we can start to work him in now, he looked fine today. Now he has to start building a base and getting back. The good news is he was in great shape when he got pulled out. It's not like you're starting from ground zero necessarily. Nonetheless, got to be smart with him and



think big picture.

Q. Is that fair to say that Mark is medically cleared to play?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, pretty much was last week. The best way I can stay it is, the testing was positive. Now it's a matter of what can he do effectively and efficiently and confidently.

Q. Is it more of he needs to strengthen around the knee and rehab, or is it more just pain tolerance?

KIRK FERENTZ: Anytime I talk about medical stuff, I always qualify it that I'm not a doctor. Look at my résumé or transcript, I guess, I stayed the hell away from chemistry, physics, all those things.

I've sat in medical meetings for a long time now. It was like a sprain, I guess, more than anything else. It was a stable joint, which is first and foremost. Then the testing has to confirm things.

It's a matter of what he can do effectively. I just threw in that word 'confidence'. That's going to be the number one conversation at the end of the week, that you can go out there and play well, play effectively, not be thinking about it, not trying to protect yourself, that type of deal. That doesn't do anybody any good.

That's what the week is at right now. It's work through it and see what he looks like. Looks like he's fine today. Who knows tomorrow. He may be sore, he may be swollen. We don't know. We'll take it a day at a time and see what it looks like.

He has to feel good. Obviously there's got to be medical clearance. None of this would have happened without the medical clearance.

Q. Could you speak to Jayden Montgomery? Seth was saying he's put himself in a position if it's Mike or Will, he's got flexibility and earned a lot of trust. Legacy, too.

KIRK FERENTZ: When we recruited him, we knew he wasn't tall. Would not be the first adjective I'd use to describe him. But we have a lot of players here that fit that bill. I have a son who played center here that was in that category, too.

Historically, go back to Mark Sindlinger. That's a lesson I learned when he played three years for us. Played really well in the '80s.

So that's not his top attribute. But he was a great student in high school. He watches film. Really impressive full-speed player, full-speed mentally. That's who he's been since he's been here. A good special teams guy. He's been recognized as a leader by our players internally.

We talked about Koen going to Vegas. Not even basically being a starter. Jayden is in the leadership group. Basically voted by his peers. Everything he's done has been really exceptional. To me he's earned his way. That's why he was a second-team guy. He's done a good job there. I think he'll do a good job this coming Saturday, however long he's in there. Excited to see him get a chance to perform. He's worked really hard for it. Smart guy, a confident guy. I know this: he'll lay it out there for us.

It's fun to see him climb the ladder like that.

Q. The slow tempo that Wisconsin's offense plays is probably unique. They're 112th in plays, but they're fifth in time of possession. 32 seconds per play. How do you simulate that? When you're at this point in the season, do you mention the fact your goals are still out there to the team, or you don't mention what the big picture is?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's fortunate 'cause we had two weeks now. Typically right after a game, we'll talk big picture briefly, just briefly, then we get back to where we're at here, what are we trying to do. It's always touched on after any game, where we're at, this is what this means. These guys are in college. They can figure all that stuff out on their own, but we like to touch on it a little bit.

To me, the sooner everybody realizes this is all week-to-week stuff, what we do. Having a chance to watch a couple games on Saturday, obviously it was really apparent every week's a new adventure. If you're not careful, it could be an adventure, too. You have to really focus on what you're doing.

Kind of smiled a little bit about what you talked about, the pace and time of possession. It's almost like back in the '80s. If you played BYU, I remember Bill Brazier always lamented he didn't care where we went to a bowl game as long as we didn't play BYU. That was his goal (smiling). It was 10-10. I don't know what he was so worried about. He spent 11 years, 12 years worrying about that when I was here. My nine years, it was always, Hope we don't play BYU (smiling). Yeah, it's funny how things change and evolve over time.

How we simulate it? Just slow things down, which is a switch, yeah. It is a switch. Usually we're rush, rush, rush.

Q. Talking to some of the players, they mentioned the importance of not being lackadaisical for the game. Is that heightened coming off a bye when you haven't played in a while?

KIRK FERENTZ: Trying to think about how to say this the best way.

I talk to our guys a lot about what they hear, what at least I think they're hearing on the outside. Again, Saturday is a good day. I can't just zero in on a game unless I got somebody like I know that's involved in it personally, that type of deal.

One thing I had noticed about broadcasts and what have you, and I don't mean to say this in an offensive way, there's so much time to fill. I can't imagine being like an analyst or play-by-play guy because you have to fill that airtime. There's a lot of verbiage, talk. All you have to do is go to ESPN, open my iPad, there's always interesting stories to talk about.

But the bottom line is nobody can predict what's going to happen. That's I guess the thing we try to talk to our players about. Plenty of examples Saturday that if you're not prepared, you could end up... All the experts think this is going to happen and, boom, it's just the opposite. In my mind it's usually because people weren't mentally prepared for it.

One thing, if anything, people should learn in conference football, I'm going back 40-some years, coming here from Pitt, where Pitt was independent in those days, one of the top teams in the country. Just kind of like pooh-poohed this conference stuff.

When you get in conference football, it's a dogfight each and every week. I think especially today with the way the conferences are, boy, there's so much parity and so much... Maybe 'parity' is not the right word. If you're not prepared, you can really have some bad things happen to you.

I mean, we have to be that way every week anyway. It's rare when we're not involved in close games. We just have to have the right mindset. It all goes back to how you prepare. Really, if you're not preparing well, you open the door for bad things to happen on Saturdays.

Q. There's already been a couple, at least a few, circumstances where guys that weren't starters to begin the season are due to injuries. How do you make sure that guys that maybe aren't No. 1 on the depth chart are mentally ready to go in at any time like

Hank was in the Indiana game?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's really their jobs. That's something we talk to them about. Refer to it as like a second team cocoon. It's a safe place. If you're not careful, you can get in a rut of just going out and practicing well enough not to draw attention to yourself, but maybe not well enough to prepare so you are prepared if you do end up on the field on Saturday.

Talk to our guys about that a lot. I always go back, cherry pick Sam Brownlee back in '04 sitting in the back of the room in August having no idea what was about to unfold and about to happen. None of us did. All of a sudden we lost four running backs. Guess what, Sam, you're in there.

But the one thing about him, he was not as gifted maybe physically as the other guys that were in front of him on the pecking order, but the guy never blew a protection, never turned the ball over. He did the things that gave us a chance to have a successful season.

Outside of making AJ Hawk miss on that one run out there, he ran like a 20-yard draw. That was his claim to fame as a guy with the ball in his hands. Otherwise it was closer to my high school career, like 1.6 yards per carry. He never blew a protection, never turned it over. That gave us a chance to have a championship year that year.

He's an easy example to cherry pick. It's because he got ready. He was ready to go when he did get called upon. Again, that was a real longshot because we had so many guys injured that year at his position.

Just use examples like that to your players, like this could be you at any time. You just never know. That's why you got to be preparing like you might be in the game. 'Cause there's a difference if you know chances are you won't be in there. Just do enough. But you're not really getting better. It all gets back to every player should be trying to get better every time they're out there on the field. Got to have that mentality.

Q. What have you seen from Sam Phillips this year coming in as a transfer in the spring, emerging as a top receiver?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sam's been great to work with since the time he showed up for his visit back I guess that would have been I think in January, right? Anyway, he's been great. Everything about him is positive. He's a really mature guy. Does a great job in the classroom. That's not an issue. He's really just blended in and melded with our team, like it's seamless. He's a great guy out there on the field. Got a really good energy and really good spirit.



Practices well. Good return guy, as well.

He's been a real positive addition.

Q. On some guys that are getting reps. I wanted to ask about Nathan. You mentioned earlier this season you weren't planning to have a true freshman get as many reps as he did. How have you seen him step up and be able to take on the workload?

KIRK FERENTZ: It really goes back to January when he showed up. It's always interesting. Everybody comes in, just how they enter in the program. That used to be a little bit more unique coming in January. Now it seems to be more of a trend. We don't mandate it, but a lot of our guys seem to do it.

Everything he's done has been really seamless. His GPA was way up there. That was impressive. It kind of goes back to he's a late recruit for us. He and his dad came up for a game probably in October, maybe early November, something like that. Then his mom came with the dad and Nathan for the official visit in December. Just a really impressive family. That part was great.

Then once he got on the field, it became apparent to us he's a little better maybe than we gave him credit for. He just seems to just handle everything pretty much in stride. It doesn't really overwhelm him. So it's been really good.

Then you want to get him in the game a little bit, but you're careful, especially with new players. Just everything he's done every step along the way so far has been good. We'll try to be smart about how we use him.

We didn't have this planned coming into it. Just 'cause of the injuries, it's created an opportunity. He's been able to, like we're talking about, you just never know if you're fourth, fifth team, then all of a sudden you're in there playing some. He's done a great job with it.

Hopefully we won't overuse him where he hits the wall. We don't want to have that happen to him. He's doing a really nice job.

Q. To clarify, the medical team says Mark is cleared, but the final decision as to whether or not he starts will be made by him and you on Friday or Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, for clarification, too, nothing happens if the medical team says no. It all starts there. They're the ones who give us the license to let him do this, let him do that. At some point he's clear to go.

All that being said, any position, if a player, once he's

cleared and he's out there working, you as a coach evaluate him. If he can't function, sprained ankle is probably a better example. Some positions you can get by with it a little bit better than you can others. Tough to be a running back with a sprained ankle.

As you watch a guy practice and compete a little bit, if he can't, A, be safe, or more importantly perform at a level, it's going to be what you're looking for, what he's looking for, you're really hitting your head on the wall. That's not smart. We may hold a guy back a little bit.

Part of that's confidence, yeah. The player's got to have confidence in his ability to play and perform. Yeah, ultimately that will be part of the conversation: How are you feeling about things? You don't want him going out there looking over his shoulder. That's not a good thing.

Q. If you're comfortable sharing, what was the conversation with you and Mark like on the sidelines when he was warming up, kind of running, you ultimately decided Hank was going to go in?

KIRK FERENTZ: He was very honest. He just said, I can't decelerate. That's an issue. You can't play. One thing to be able to run, but if you can't stop, be kind of like when I tried to ski. That would have been 40-some years ago. I was okay on the going down part. I was bad on the stop part (smiling).

It wouldn't have been smart to put him in the game. Wouldn't have been fair to anybody.

Q. You now have had five night games that have been announced this year. Your thoughts on playing so many prime time games?

KIRK FERENTZ: It kind of fits in the category of whenever we added the first two west coast teams. That was pretty much okay. Throw it all out the window. Everything is geography, tradition. That's out the window.

There was a time, I'll date myself, when 1:00 was a normal starting time. Then when I got back here some 20-some years ago, it was 11:00. Now there is no normal. Maybe night is normal.

Yeah, I think the obvious assumption is that TV's going to kind of tell us what to do, when to do it. That's one thing I've told our guys. We know when our 11 games are, 12 games are, I'm dating myself. We all know when the 12 games are. Nobody knows what time they're going to be.

You just have to stay flexible. It seems like this is the new trend. This is one for the books, five out of seven, right?

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Pretty amazing.

Q. How much, if at all, if Mark is not available, would you anticipate changing the offensive scheme to put your team in position to be successful on Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll try to lean toward whatever works best for the quarterback in there, so...

Hank and Jeremy are a little bit different in terms of the way they operate and all that type of thing. It's not going to look a lot different with any of the three of the guys we have right now.

But yeah, I think that's what you do with any quarterback: you try to lean toward what they do effectively, do best. We did the same thing last year with Cade and Sully. Just kind of like tailor make it a little bit better when he does best, then you go from there.

It's not a wholesale different to offense by any stretch.

Q. Coaches always like to deal with known things. Are you preparing this week as if Mark is your starter or preparing if he is not your starter?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, I guess that's a good question 'cause we just got done planning for the last couple guys. I guess it started last week.

Yeah, no, we put the game plan up there and just kind of ties in with the last question. Depending on who's in the game will dictate where you lean a little bit.

Offense looks like the offense pretty much. Just kind of go in the direction with whatever that particular player's skill set may be and try to emphasize that if that player's in the game.

I mean, if Mark starts again, it's like last week: there's no guarantee he'll finish, or any player. You have to have that flexibility.

We're not banking on anything. We've had nothing but unknowns. Today I would say was the most positive stuff that we've had in terms of, Okay, maybe this is realistic. But we still got a lot of water to get over here before we get there.

We'll see what it looks like Friday and go from there.

Q. Last year when you played them, kind of ran all over them, they really changed their personnel for sure up front. Added four to five new bodies, all of 'em in the 300-pound range. Have they done anything

schematically to enable themselves to stop the run?

KIRK FERENTZ: I was kind of alluding to earlier. Me personally I don't think philosophically they're a lot different. I think the personnel is different.

As I said, it's the front seven. What you said is exactly right. They're playing a lot of guys up front. In the front, the four-down guys. I mean, sometimes three deep. They're rolling through there. They keep their guys fresh that way.

They are better. One of the inside guys came from LSU. Got a guy from Tulane. You got right down the list. They've got a lot of guys from a lot of different places that have joined the group. They're all for the most part bigger than what they had. The guy from Louisville is a really good player, No. 22. A lot of guys are really active that way.

I think they're doing a good job keeping them fresh. I would include in my personal opinion the two linebackers I think are reflective of what you're talking about, too. They're downhill, physical linebackers. Not saying the guys last year weren't, but they were a little different style.

I think the stats that you referred to, the run stats, have been really impressive, and there's a reason for it. They've not so much philosophically in terms of scheme, but more so in terms of personnel I think have really bolstered themselves a little bit. It's going to be tough to run the football against them.

Thank you.

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