

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, October 21, 2025

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Good to have everybody here. Just to start out by taking a minute just to express our condolences to the Marilyn Howard family. She just passed. She's been a longtime supporter and friend of the university, and she and her husband have been very generous contributors and supporters, not only in athletics but the entire university. They really stepped forward in a big way when we did this project. I've developed a relationship with her family. They're great people.

Marilyn in particular, she had a really serious health challenge about 15, 17 years ago and spent some time in a facility in Ankeny, and thought that might be the end of the line for her. She rallied from that, and had a very full and exciting life since that time.

Been to a lot of things with her family, and my biggest takeaway is what a positive person and strong-willed person she was. So it was always a delight to have a chance to visit with her.

All that being said, our condolences certainly go out to her family, her daughters, Donna and Diane and then sons Steve and Scott and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren, one of whom just finished up with us as a student manager, now in the PT school across the street here.

Our thoughts are with the entire family.

Moving forward here, step back for one second to last week's game, just really proud of the team's effort. I thought the guys played hard and showed a lot of resiliency, and that game went down for the full 60. Tremendous environment; so appreciative of our fans, as well.

I want to finish up by extending my congratulations to Xavier for being Big Ten Defensive Player of the Week. He's playing outstanding football, playing his best as a senior, something that helps any football team, and he's been a strong leader, great leader for us, so happy for him

and certainly well-deserved on that one.

Transition to this game, our captains are the same: Ethan Hurkett, Koen Entringer, Logan Jones and Mark Gronowski.

Injury-wise things are looking a little bit better. Jaz and TJ have both been practicing. Looks like they're going to be okay. Jaden Harrell looks like he'll be okay. Good to have those guys back, certainly.

Luke Gaffney will not be back. He had an injury last week, something that's been ongoing, so he'll be out through the bye week. A few guys with bumps and bruises from the game on Saturday, as expected, but I think everybody has got a chance to be ready to go. That's kind of where that's at right now.

That being said, we're going to need to be at our best this Saturday. We're playing a really good Minnesota team, and they're coming off an impressive win against Nebraska last Friday. They're going to come in here with momentum.

Pretty much what you'd expect, they're a big physical team, playing well in all three areas right now. Offensively big line, a lot of experience up there, and guys doing a good job, big tight ends do a good job with them, good receiver corps.

The running backs have been really good and continue to be good. Got a returner back who's a really good player.

Then the wildcard has been the quarterback position. Playing a young guy who's done really an outstanding job, and you can see him, like their whole team, getting better week to week, so he's playing with a lot of confidence. Had a really good game the other night.

Defensively, big, strong, tough and aggressive. Their attack, very sound fundamentally. On special teams they do a great job. It's clear they invest a lot on special teams. They have good specialists, and then they have done a really good job with their core guys, guys that are active as players, but then they have a handful of guys that aren't really in their two deep but take a lot of pride in playing well on special teams. We've seen a lot of guys like that around here and take a lot of ownership. So they do a nice job there.

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

No. 3 is a very dangerous return guy.

All that being said, it's a big challenge for us, two 5-2 teams, so it should be a really tough Big Ten contest.

Kid Captain is Luke Johnson from Dunlap, Illinois, an eight-year-old. Great to have him with us. He had several conditions basically since birth, and on a visit here to the step family children's hospital fairly recently they discovered a spinal condition that is really rare, extremely rare, and could have led to paralysis, so they were able to discover that and then more importantly able to address it, and last Halloween actually, a 13-hour surgery, if you can imagine that. The thing he was most upset about I've been told is he missed Halloween.

The staff there did a great job trying to simulate that, dressed in costumes, et cetera, so it's going to be special for him to be with us.

Last year he was watching the wave from across the street, and now he'll be on this side of the street and leading the wave, he and his family, so we look forward to having them here.

Then the last couple things real quick, going back to the game, all of you who are paying attention to the Big Ten, a lot of competitive football, a lot of really good teams, and this is another week where we're facing a big challenge playing a really good Minnesota team.

A lot on the line certainly, a rivalry trophy involved, and we know it'll be a great environment. We'll look forward to kickoff on Saturday.

Q. In some ways it seems from the outside that Mark Gronowski kind of epitomizes what you want in your program, gritty, tough, selfless, willing to do whatever it takes to win. How quickly did he present those intangibles to you and the team, and what's been the response like from you and your team to him and the way he plays the game?

KIRK FERENTZ: It probably goes back to our first visit with him in person when he and his dad came out here in January. Probably back before even that. It's a little bit like recruiting, and obviously he wasn't recruited by the Big Ten schools or the MAAC schools I'm assuming, so a lot of people missed. I don't know how obvious it was or wasn't, but what he did at South Dakota State in a short time is impressive, and I don't think you stumble into things like that. I'm sitting here thinking about Jovon Johnson. Coach Moore was still alive at that time and he kept encouraging me to look at the film, he did everything so well, and he

wasn't very tall, but he just did everything for his team.

So Mark's production at South Dakota State is so impressive. You meet him in person, he and his dad, and just tremendous people. But then to your point, it's when you're around somebody for an extensive period of time and you get to see them in a lot of conditions that that's how you really learn about people, and it's been great to be around him at every turn.

A little frustrating for everybody, especially him, not being able to go in the spring, but the way he handled that and navigated that was really impressive. Then he got going in June and really quickly earned everybody's respect, I think, internally.

Now you go through the season and watch what he's done, it's just been really impressive. To my knowledge we haven't had a quarterback like him since I've been here, and I don't think we coached one in the '80s either like him. He's a little bit unique that way. But he's got just so many good attributes that the good players typically have.

So it's been great, and he's just blended in so well with everybody here. We're glad he's with us.

Q. I want to ask you about your Kid Captain program. Since 2009, you just passed 200 Kid Captains in total. Through all the change of your program and the Big Ten has gone through, you still stand up here before every Tuesday and you tell us about the kid captain. I'm curious, what kind of example or what do you want your players to learn or what do you hope they've learned over the past over a decade?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, it's like the wave, too, I want to make sure the credit goes where it belongs. The wave was originally Krista Young's idea. It was somebody else that came up with this idea, this concept, and it's a wonderful thing to celebrate.

The hardest thing has got to be picking 12 captains, just limiting it to that, because all these stories are so compelling.

But I think the great part, it's a two-way street, obviously. The Kid Captains and their families really enjoy it, coming here in August and then certainly coming to be honored for a game and being recognized.

But the two-way street part of it is something we try to remind our guys all the time. We choose to do what we do, all of us who are coaching or playing, and then most importantly, it's a great reminder that we're able to do what we're able to do. Not everybody is that lucky or that



fortunate.

We all think at times we've got it hard. You run into a tough situation, disappointing and all that stuff, and then you look at any one of these stories, it gives you some perspective on life. It's really healthy, I think, in this day and age. I think it's even more healthy than it's been before, and certainly it's healthy for the population that I get to work with because these guys are all -- they're fortunate to be involved in a great game like this. It's a pretty good deal.

It's a good tangible reminder for everybody that we've all got it pretty good. We think it's hard, and it is hard, but there are things that are a lot harder and more serious than that.

Q. During the bye week, Tim compared Mark's running style to Tim Tebow. From what you can remember from Tebow's time at Florida and in the NFL, is that an accurate comp, and is there any more to that comparison than just simply the physical between-the-tackles running style?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there's probably a good fair comparison there, and it's unusual. That's why Tim was famous, too. Tim Tebow. Tim Lester, as well (laughter). But Tim Tebow, it's a very unique thing. You don't see it very often.

I was just telling somebody here grabbing food this morning, I was with Mark Rypien for a year in Cleveland. It was the latter part of his career, so his best parts physically weren't there, not that he was a running quarterback like Mark is, but some similar personality attributes where the guy is older than -- and Rypien was older at that time. He was a veteran guy, had had a lot of success. But there was something about his confidence that was so -- it was understated in some ways. He got strong, if that makes any sense. I think Mark kind of leads with that kind of style.

He's very grounded, yet he commands respect. He commands attention and respect by the way he does things.

But the running part is very unique. The one up the middle the other night, it's pretty impressive.

Q. You've had countless examples of guys playing football their senior year after battling through inconsistencies or maybe some poor performances. TJ Hall just seems like he's another one of those stories or questions about the secondary entering the year, but despite not having a pick, he's been probably

one of your most consistent players. What can you say about the way he's continued to attack the day and how he's grown as a leader because he seems like a guy that he doesn't speak up often, but when he does, it just seems like the secondary really responds to him.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, picks are great. We're all for them, really all for them. But it doesn't tell the whole story, kind of like sacks on defense don't tell the whole story. They're great to have, but it doesn't always necessarily reflect the kind of pressure you're getting or disruption.

TJ has just been playing really well. We've been fortunate. We've historically usually had a corner, sometimes two that really kind of stabilize things, and you can help out the other guy maybe a little bit more.

Last year we didn't have that luxury -- and Deshaun has improved, as well, in my opinion, but TJ really took it another step. We kind of saw that coming over the course of spring. He just had an outstanding spring. There was a big step forward in terms of growth, confidence. A lot of that just comes from maturity and also comes from having hard times.

He's just stayed the course. He works hard, got a great attitude. He's been a strong leader. It's not always spoken, but he does a great job, and he does a great job in the building. I'll see him leaving a lot of times 8:30 at night. He'll eat and go back, watch tape, I guess. I assume that's what he's doing. He'll say goodnight as he's going down the steps. Just really dedicated. He's really enjoying things.

It's a delight to have him on our team.

Q. As the offensive line has kind of gone through the rebuild, there's been growing pains. There's been times where it hasn't been where you wanted it to be, and obviously now you're a little bit on the other side of things. I was curious how you saw George Barnett. When it wasn't where you guys wanted it to be, how he worked through that.

KIRK FERENTZ: How do I put this? It's kind of with Norm, we started out 27 years ago, Norm never stated the obvious, which I appreciated, that we had work to do, and we always tried to find the positives. Hey, what can we build off of, here's something we're doing a little bit better, and how do we build off that.

I think George clearly knew that we had work to do. We went through that the other night, whether it's injuries, guys choosing not to stay at the game, all those types of things,

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

attrition, there's always things that happen, and you never know where it's going to hit or what position group.

But George has been so steady, rock steady since he got here. He's an excellent teacher. He does a great job with the guys, equally as important maybe more important off the field he helps keep them stable, too.

Some of the things I described the other night, guys playing before they're ready to play, they know that. The players know that. You've heard me say it a million times, you can't hand a player confidence; you've got to earn that and you've got to work through that. With the linemen it's so important to get their feet on the ground and let them really learn how to play.

So I think that's a big part of the reason why we're better, in a better place now. But George has been able to handle it, whether -- you name the challenge. He just has been rock steady with the guys, and he's an excellent technician, all that part of the stuff, it's there for him. He's got that part.

But the mental component is really important, too, and I can't imagine anybody better to do the job that he's done.

Q. I wanted to ask about Jaden Harrell. With him coming back, does he move back into a starting role, and can you speak to the performances of Jayden Montgomery so far?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't know how we're going to do it yet. We haven't really quite decided. We'll get through the week and figure that out. It's a little bit like last week, talking about Lutmer and Deshaun. I feel like we have five starters in the secondary right now. We just added to our depth.

I think all of us felt confident about Jayden going in there, and now that he's played, we all feel really confident. He's just done a great job. He's not tall, and I don't mean that in a degrading way, but that was probably the reason he didn't get recruited by anybody. Obviously we had a little inside knowledge with him.

Sometimes, and you've heard me say it before, Mark Sindlinger taught me a lesson about height. Outstanding player for us for three years on three really good teams, and Bob Sanders, obviously. So yeah, ideally we'd like everyone to look like Jack Campbell, 6'4", 245, and run like a deer, but that's few and far between.

But Jayden, just everything about him, he's an outstanding student, great leader, great personality, hard worker, and that's who he's been in our program, and he was a really good special teams player, and now he's playing at a high

level -- he's a communicator in there being a middle linebacker.

I'm not going to say I'm surprised, but it's great to see his hard work and all the things he's invested show up on the field, and it has certainly since he's been in there.

Q. I wanted to ask a multipart question on tight ends, but first one to clarify, I saw Vonnahme in a sling. Is he out this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. Yeah, he's out of the sling and he's doing better by the day. I think he has a chance. We'll see.

Q. Do you intend for Addison Ostrenga intend to return next season at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: He does, yeah. We wanted to give him a little time to get through the initial part of the injury, but yeah.

Q. Depth-wise, then, seems like you're getting down there at tight ends. What are you looking at in terms of production there? It hasn't been a ton of it thus far.

KIRK FERENTZ: They're all doing a good job. It's kind of been by committee, if you will. I am happy with the whole group. They're really playing well.

Hayden Large is playing outstanding football. Two years ago he was a great kid on the team. He was OK as a player. Last year he played well. Right now he's playing really well. Just happy with him. Certainly Zach has done a good job, and DJ was playing, Mike Burt is ready to go. We'll just keep working the guys and see how they do. Thomas Meyer may get some snaps this week. It's a good group, and they're all doing fine.

Q. Xavier Nwankpa came in with incredibly high expectations from everyone around the country. He told us that there were times where he wasn't probably playing the way he wanted to play. This season seems to be a little different. He says that he feels like he's having more of an impact. What have you noticed from him and the way he's playing and what he's doing right now for your team?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I referenced this the other night a little bit. First of all, not that anybody cares, but I think these ratings, outside ratings, they're just unfair. I guess that's the best word I can use. I'm not sure what criteria people use sometimes to make those determinations.

There's a lot of things that go into being a good college



... when all is said, we're done.®

football player, just like if you go to the next level it's the same thing up there. A lot of subjectivity, all those kinds of things.

But the downside, and I'm not trying to kill anybody's business, but the downside of tagging a player as a can't-miss guy, what if he doesn't come in and play as a freshman. First of all, it might mean you have some other guys that are good players on your team, and second thing it means is probably it's a reality of playing good college football and playing good NFL football is kind of the same way. We were just in there talking about quarterbacks, and Andy Reid being able to sit Mahomes for a year before he threw him in there, Packers have done it with three straight quarterbacks. It's really tough to do it in today's world.

I'm off on a tangent here.

Usually you have to draft a quarterback. If your team is not good you're usually not good because you don't have a quarterback. So you put the quarterback in there and then he gets beat up.

I'm totally on a tangent.

Mac Jones I heard yesterday is 4-1 as a starter. If you went back and looked at all the first-rounders on different teams now and looked at their records, it's pretty obvious, guys have to learn how to play.

Xavier went through that, like most guys do. There's some give and take and all that thing, but he has a great attitude, works hard, and you hope when you're a junior or a senior you're playing your best football, and I think that's what we've seen with him, playing last year and playing this year. He's clearly playing at his highest level in his career.

Where you have problems is when a guy is not playing well his senior year, he's not playing up to his best football in his career, that's when teams kind of falter and fail a little bit. But he's done a great job.

He's just a tremendous young person, too. I wasn't quite sure what to think about him initially because he's almost kind of a quiet guy in some ways. Not introverted but he's quiet, but he's a delightful person, very humble and very hardworking, so he's done a great job. We're really thrilled he's on our team.

Q. I wanted to ask, taking the opening kick every single game so far this season. I'm curious as to the thought process, if there's analytics that you lean to or you just want to give the ball to Mark and let him go, or what your thought process is behind that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it goes back 20 plus years, even when we couldn't win very many games, we took the ball. I think if you look it up -- those game notes, there's always that stuff in there. The percentage is better when we take it. That's not the analytics everybody else is thinking about.

But last year I got swayed a little bit a year ago during August I guess it would have been. We were having a discussion, and a couple guys in the room made a very compelling argument to defer, why it's smart, and I can't remember what game it was, but basically I got upset after, and I just said, that's the last time we're going to do that. So we didn't play well and probably lost the game. I can't remember who it was; doesn't matter.

Anyway, we're back to being hard-headed let's take the ball and go and we'll see what happens.

Believe it or not, there are a couple arguments you can make for taking the ball, too, and then maybe having the choice in the second half, getting the wind in the fourth quarter. It's one advantage, but you can't -- obviously it's pretty hard to score the first possession of the half in the second half unless you get a pick six or scoop up a fumble or something like that. So that's one thing you can't do.

You can make a million arguments, but it's just something we've kind of settled into. I wish I could give you a better answer. Sorry.

Q. I wanted to follow up with the offensive line. With Minnesota recording it was a program record nine sacks last week, how much does having the amount of confidence you have in your offensive line help knowing that that's a defensive line that's coming in with a rather large chip on their shoulder?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, these guys are very aggressive, and they've done a really nice job rushing the passer. It's multiple guys, too. It's not just one guy. So that's a concern.

But I think probably the bigger thing -- hopefully you're managing the long-yardage situations. Once you get into a certain situation with these guys yardage-wise, they throw a lot of stuff at you, a lot of creative stuff, and it's a challenge, plus it's just a challenge even if they were straight rushing because the probabilities always go down.

So a big part of our success I think this Saturday is going to have to be being productive 1st and 2nd down so we're not looking at a lot of 3rd and 7s, 3rd and 8s because they've proven they can be very effective when that comes to bat.



We're going to have to do a good job there, and if we get in those situations, we're going to have to really be tight and get the ball out, too. You've got to get the ball out pretty quick. You can't just stand there and look around all day because you don't have all day.

Q. I wanted to ask about the 105 roster limit. I know that that kind of got modified a little bit this year, and I know you've discussed how you were maybe displeased with the implementation a little bit. I wanted to ask how it's impacted your roster. You've had a couple injuries at a couple different positions. Have you felt that in practice, that you maybe don't have a roster as big as you used to have, and what have the effects been on the team?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm smiling because I'm thinking about we do a little work after practice typically with younger guys, and a couple of the guys on defense were wearing black jerseys even though they're supposed to be in white and the defense is in white for home games, so it makes it a challenge for the quarterback when he throws the ball and the black jerseys are out there playing defense; who's who, who's eligible, all that stuff.

It's created some problems we didn't foresee necessarily. But it also is a reflection, I think our team has been really good about -- we are going to have to -- if we're short in an area, and you always end up short in an area or two, then guys are going to have to help chip in. Yeah, maybe if you played high school running back -- we've been doing that for years. You played high school running back, so we need you to be the running back on the scout team this week or the receiver, that type of deal.

We're just doing more of it now than we have in the past because our numbers are a little bit thinner, and it does seem like injuries happen in certain areas, and for a while there, I think we had three or four offensive linemen that were out for, like, weeks. So all of a sudden you're getting stretched thin.

It makes it a challenge to practice. In my opinion, it's kind of the equivalent of in the NFL, they've changed it a little bit now, they've expanded their practice squads, but when I was in the NFL, I think it was six guys, which is just stupid because you've got guys that are -- you want to protect your guys that you're paying the big money to. It was illogical other than they're saving a few bucks. I think that's probably why we made this decision, how we came up with 105. It's a long story.

But anyway, yeah, it's changed things a little bit.

Q. I wanted to ask about your counterpart. PJ and you may have slightly different personalities I would say, but he has expressed a lot of respect for you over the years. In fact, he still has a rejection letter from you as a grad assistant up on his office wall --

KIRK FERENTZ: (Sighs.)

I turned Scott Pioli down, too, and Jim Haslett. I remember having the conversation with Jim. I said, you don't understand, I'm sitting in my office, Jim -- because now I'm the head coach at Maine, right. I'm looking out my window, it's like a portal on a cruise ship about like this big. It was cinderblock -- I said, you don't want to come here. Trust me, you do not want to come here. This is not what you want to be doing. Anyway, I don't think he's mad at me. Scott Pioli is still mad at me.

Q. PJ is now next to you the second longest tenured Big Ten coach. Talk about how his transition has gone at Minnesota, maybe what they've developed into as a program and the challenges that they have faced year in and year out because they seem to carry the same characteristics that they have for the last eight, nine years.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that's the answer right there is the consistency. We all have different personalities, different ways of doing things. That's what makes life go around.

But I think you touched on what really counts. I don't pretend to be an expert on Western Michigan, but we played them I think it was his first year, and they were not good when we played them, whatever year that was, and then a couple years later they're playing in the Cotton Bowl.

Now you get a chance to watch it up close firsthand. First of all, there are no easy jobs anywhere in college football, I don't think, and we have our challenges, Minnesota has got their challenges. Every job does. But he's done a great job, I think, of working around whatever challenges it is that they may have.

He's done something that really hasn't been done there in quite some time. They're winning consistently.

The biggest thing for me as a coach is you turn the film on and it looks pretty consistent no matter who the coordinators are. They play a certain way offensively, defensively and on special teams. They're typically a big, physical team, and they typically play really hard and they don't beat themselves.

That's probably why he's been in the job however many



years it's been now that he's been there. It's been quite a while. That's the other truism; you don't stay in the job if you're not doing at least a pretty capable job, and sometimes you'd better be doing a really capable job or the way the decisions get made change. But you've got to be good and you've got to be consistent, and they've been that.

We're playing a team here that we thought, an inexperienced quarterback. Well, that guy is right up the ladder doing a really good job. It's going to be another tough contest on Saturday. That's kind of where it's going.

It's a tribute to their whole coaching staff. Those guys do a great job, and they've had staff continuity, too. That's the other thing I'd point out. A lot of guys there with a lot of years, and they know what they're trying to do. It's coming across really well on the field for them.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports