

# University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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## Coach LeVar Woods

### Press Conference

LEVAR WOODS: It's great to be a Hawkeye. I can say that, first and foremost, go out and beat Minnesota, keep Floyd home, and then on top of that, even better surprise or better news on Sunday evening, our special teams analyst Brock Sherman and his wife Crystal welcomed a brand new baby girl, Elena, into the world, so it's been an exciting time around here in building and got a new member of the Hawkeye family, so we're proud and really excited for them.

Talking about special teams and kind of where things are at, happy with where we're at. Guys have been working. Guys have been competing. They've shown up every single week. I think you guys have seen that on tape, how they compete, they fight, they battle every position across the board. At times we've been dominant, and there's times also where there's a play here or there, something that we could be a little bit better. So that's the focus this week is trying to improve and trying to see where we can be better and how we can do that. Is it scheme? Is it personnel? Is it a new face that comes in?

When you look at our units, they're a mix of some veteran guys, some guys that are up and comers, and then some guys that are brand new faces. I think we saw that last week at Minnesota.

Happy with where everyone is at. Happy with what's going on. The veteran group, you're looking at Rexroth, Harrell, Nwankpa, Hall and Lutmer, guys that are out there busting their butt every day not only on defense and offense but also in regards to special teams.

Some of the up-and-coming guys, you see guys like DeLong, who's been here for a couple years doing a really good job for us, Van Kekerix is another guy that keeps showing up from week to week, so those guys are doing an excellent job.

Alex Eichmann, maybe not getting the reps he wants on offense as a receiver, but doing an excellent job for us on special teams. Bryce Hawthorne is another one in that world, Hayden Large, guys that continue to contribute for



this football team.

Some of those new faces, we all saw KJ Parker last week, which is fun. It's kind of been the last couple weeks in the making for him. Really excited for him. An awesome young kid, great future, high energy, just trying to find the best places for him. Preston Ries, Derrick Weisskopf, Cam Buffington stepped in there, as well.

A good group of kids, a good mix of kids. Some of them are men. Some of them are actually married with wives now. But again, it's a great group, and I think they love each other. They compete. They scrap. I don't think there's any better picture for a team that loves each other and cares about each other than the Penn State game a couple weeks ago. Found a way to pick each other up and get the job done.

Again, happy with where everything is at, and continue to push forward down the stretch.

**Q. I feel like there's nobody in this country I'd rather talk to about punt and kick returners than you. You've played alongside Tim Dwight, you played against Devin Hester, Brian Mitchell, Dante Hall, and then now you've coached Ihmir, you've coached Charlie Jones, you've coached Cooper DeJean, and the list goes on and on. Now you have Kaden Wetjen. In what ways does he have similar skills and traits as some of those great players you've competed against and have coached, and in what areas is he possibly unique to where he is maybe better than even a few of those other guys in those areas where he's been able to be so successful?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, I think right off, another name you left off is Antwaan Randle El, who was a quarterback in college, who was an unbelievable competitor as a quarterback and then I faced him as a punt returner and he brought one right back against us. I think I was with Detroit at that time, and he was in Pittsburgh.

Another really good returner, but with Kaden -- the sky's the limit for him. One, he's fearless, which you have to be to be a returner, especially a punt returner because there's not much time you have to make a quick decision, people are bearing down on you right away. He's built low to the ground, which helps him because he's sturdy, he's not

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going to go down on the first hit, and I think he does a great job making decisions and judgment.

It didn't always happen that way. It wasn't that way at the beginning. He had to work. He had to put in his time. I think he's a very unique story in that when he came here, he was fast and he was going 100 different directions fast but never the right direction, and I think he put in the time and he learned and he studied, and it's become a thing for him.

I talked to our players about the three levels of people. There's people that are interested, that kind of show up, I'm kind of interested, yeah, sounds good. I'm committed, hey, Coach, I'm here every day. Or there's people that are obsessed. They're kind of all the different ways, the tricks, what more can I do. I think Kaden is in that world, in the obsessed world, and he continues to do that each and every week, and he's surrounded by 10 guys every day that go out there and bust their bust for him, and they love him and they want to get him to the end zone, and you saw that on Saturday.

Those people were so excited for him. It's been fun to watch because he's become an electric playmaker. He's become dominant at what he does. You can feel the crowd anytime he's back there. I can hear it through my headset. All of a sudden you hear the crowd just roar on their feet through a headset and people are talking on that. It's fun to watch for sure.

**Q. I want to continue on with Kaden when it comes to his fearlessness. I think that's the first thing that pops off when you watch him on tape and in a game. How important of a factor is that for a returner? On top of that, when do you know if somebody is fearless when you're auditioning guys on kick return, on punt return? How much of it is just their natural approach to it, and how much can you teach, and is it even possible to kind of build on they might have a skill set but they don't have that fearlessness?**

LEVAR WOODS: Sure, I think a lot of it is decision making, so you can find out how people make decisions. We do that through drills, put guys in competitive situations, put guys out in front of the crowd at spring game or the kid scrimmage when there's 20,000, 30,000 people out there. Everyone can do it off JUGS and it looks good and the offensive linemen are catching punts off the JUGS, and the linebackers, oh, it's great, hey, I can do this, Coach, and then all of a sudden you put them out in front of a crowd, and all these people are talking and you get nervous, right. So you can see that. That's one way to test guys.

Another way is through drills, competitive but controlled drills.

But then the reality is you just have to watch a guy and you have to know a guy, and you see him on offense, you see him on defense, you see what he does in those elements, and then can he do it.

Going back to the decision making, you can teach kids how to make decisions, a way to make faster decisions. Some of that stuff, though, is innate. There's a guy sitting back there in the defensive room right now, Desmond King, who there's some stuff he had that was innate. Now, he didn't have the same speed that Kaden had, the breakaway speed -- you forgot Desmond King. Micah Hyde, forgot him, too. (Laughter.)

Anyway, I actually did tell both of them, Desmond and Micah, I was like, man, I wish I was coaching you guys right now, we'd be so much better. You guys would have each five touchdowns.

Anyway, back to what I was talking about then. Again, there's some stuff you can coach and some stuff guys got to have. I think Kaden has got a good mix of both. It wasn't easy at all and it hasn't been easy and it's still a work in progress and there's still more he can improve on, but he's playing very confident right now, and again, he's a dangerous weapon back there.

**Q. Wanted to ask about KJ. You mentioned him in your opening statement, but it was either a couple weeks ago when we first saw him in 32 and everybody is like, who the heck is that. I guess when did his potential start to show to you in just playing special teams from the get-go because he was a guy we heard about as a receiver and now he's on special teams, so I'm curious how it all materialized?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, we saw some of his athleticism and play making last year as a freshman on the scout team. You saw some of that. That sounds good when someone is showing you a card and here, run this line, do this, do that, that's easy to do. It's easy to see those things. But then when a kid has to put in -- he gets put in the game, he has to make his own decisions, see his own reads, it's a much different deal. KJ has been a work in progress over fall camp and into this season and he's done a really good job. He'll be the first to tell you I gave him a tongue lashing like nobody's business last week in practice, but he took it and he made the corrections and he improved and he goes out in the game and does it and does it well and makes two huge plays, almost blocks a punt, guy shanks it off 13 yards, sets up a score for us, and then the other one was a huge block for Kaden's



touchdown.

You can coach kids and you can try to put them in the best position, you can teach them and show them, but at some point they've got to go out and make the play, and I think KJ did that. He took the coaching and he's improved.

He's a great kid, great energy. The sky's the limit for this kid not only on special teams but also on offense, and if he ever wanted to play defense, I think he could do that, too. Special teams is sort of a mix of that for him. But he has a bright future.

**Q. I wanted to have you step into dad mode for a second. You and your former teammate Jerry Montgomery are the first Hawkeyes to play for Kirk as a head coach and then have a son play for him as also their head coach. Just wondering about that special dynamic because as a dad I know it takes a lot to want to send your son off and trust them with a program like that. For you to be able to send him to a head coach that you know so well and that you played under, that's something that not many people in the country get a chance to do, but just the special relationship that you're able to build between you and Mason and Kirk as well.**

LEVAR WOODS: I think it speaks to the culture here at Iowa. Rarely do you go to a place where a coach has been there five years or 10 years, talking about 26 years, so it's a completely different deal here at Iowa.

Again, most people don't have those experiences. Robert Gallery was here this past weekend, Steinbach last weekend, Considine was here. You just go back to guys that played here a long time ago and the head coach is still the same, so it's very rare. So start with that.

Then you have the experience with Coach Ferentz, he was my head coach, came in during a time of transition, completely changed this place, changed the culture, changed a lot of things and also kept the things that needed to be kept kept.

That's a great way to approach it. But the things that I heard from him as a young guy when I used to have hair, curly hair, and I tell kids this all the time, we used to sit in seats not as comfortable as the ones they sit in but it was over in the old building, and the messages are the same, going back to his first press conference in 1998. The same messages.

To me, those are things that you want for your son. You want the consistency. You want people to hear the messages that you heard, that helped shape you, that

helped turn you into the person you are, and we're lucky to have that here with Coach Ferentz.

Jerry, I'm sure speaks the same way and feels the same way. Jayden, his son, it's fun to be around him. I call him Jerry probably three, four times a day. Some of that's on accident, some of that's on purpose just to mess with him. But it's a very unique place here. It's very cool to be here and just be in those kind of situations.

There's going to be more players' sons that have come through this place, too, so it'll be fun.

**Q. When you see Rhys punt in warmups, and we've seen it happen, they're booming, but it doesn't seem like it's translated as much in the game. What needs to get better, I guess, going into November with your punting?**

LEVAR WOODS: I think some of this, too, if you watch Rhys and you know Rhys and you've been around him, he's young still. He's young and fairly inexperienced compared to other guys that have played the position and other guys that have played the position here, there still is that maturation process as a human being, and he's going through that, and he's fully capable -- the sky's the limit for him.

We have not seen his best at all, so that's encouraging. That's exciting. That's what drives you as a coach and as a competitor because we want to get that out of him.

Then to get him to the point where he's consistent and feels comfortable doing it every single time. I know Tory went through some of the same stuff. You go back to he came in 2020, did really well; he couldn't tell you how he did well. You go into '21, maybe not the same. There were flashes, sort of like with Rhys, there's flashes that you see, but I think it's just consistency over time.

I see that through all specialists. Look at Drew Stevens. He came in and set the world on fire year one. '89 percent field goals, three 50-yard field goals. That gets you to the Pro Bowl in the National Football League. Then he comes in year two and it's good one day, next day -- up and down. There's some of that going on with young players.

It's not just that position, but it's youth. My job as a coach is to get him to where I know he can be and be consistent, and his job as a player is to do that same stuff.

Again, we'll just continue working, and that's what this week is for, and expect more out of them. Expect more out of myself, too.



**Q. Only five more guaranteed games with Kaden. Sam has been his backup this year. He's also a senior. What's your depth like in terms of younger guys at that kick and punt return position? Do you feel like you have the next guy in that lineage on the roster right now? And what does it take to find and then develop that?**

LEVAR WOODS: I think if you know us and you watch us, there's someone else on this team. There's someone else out there. KJ Parker is one I'll throw out. You mentioned Sam. I think McNeil can do this. There's other guys out there. Zach Lutmer, because we've all seen him, right? We all saw his touchdown. It looked like a punt return to me.

So there's guys on our team right now. I'm sure during recruiting we'll find someone else that we feel like could do that, so we'll just continue to develop them and continue to put them in those drills I mentioned before and in those situations trying to test them and put them back there.

Again, same thing with Kaden. Kaden, it took a while for him to get put in there, and really his opportunity came through injury. There's a couple other guys, I would say Jackson Naeve is a young guy that no one has ever seen or heard of but he continues to do a good job in practice, but we haven't tested him yet. We haven't put him out there. We'll just continue to do that.

**Q. I wanted to ask, I know the punt return game and everything is a big thing, but Drew Stevens just broke the school's record for career made field goals. Obviously he's had his ups and downs throughout his career, but how have you seen him develop the consistency to be able to break that kind of record?**

LEVAR WOODS: I think you hit the nail on the head with Drew. It's a unique story, along with Kaden. Very talented. I'll say Drew was going 100 miles an hour in 100 different directions in his way, as a kicker would go. I mentioned his first season already. Then you have a lull in his second year, right, up and down, inconsistent.

Then he comes in and battles his way back in year three and has another really good year. Again, that puts him on par -- I've done the studies and all this stuff. It puts him on par with the top 10 players at his position in the National Football League. So I think he's that kind of player, that kind of talent.

You guys can look at all the stuff because I'm sure you will at some point. But my point is I think that's the mark of the person, who he is. He's a competitor. When he first came here as a freshman he was 165 pounds. He'd go out there

and we'd all look at him like oh my, this guy, wait for him to kick this, and boom, the ball would jump off his foot.

So you could tell there was a competitor, there was a tiger in there somewhere just waiting to get turned loose. I think for him, it's been every single day trying to be consistent, trying to get better, trying to improve at what he does. He does it very quietly, doesn't say much, at least around me he doesn't. I'm sure he's a different personality away from me.

But I'm proud of that kid, as proud of any guy I've ever coached because of how he battles and how he competes.

Again, he hit probably the highest of the high and the lowest of the lows you can hit at that position, and he's fought his way out of it.

So I believe in that guy. I believe in him wholeheartedly. I know his teammates do, too. I know Coach Ferentz does. So he continues to show us in practice, so we continue to put him in situations.

**Q. One of the more impressive things about the return game is the blocking that takes place. Can you kind of take us inside how you build that as a team and execute in those blocks?**

LEVAR WOODS: So it's going to sound simple. It's going to sound simple to anyone that's ever played here in the last probably call it 10 years has heard of these drills. So you hear of avoid zone compete and you hear avoid zone compete on an angle, then you hear combat zone. Ask any of the players now, some of them will get squeamish when they hear combat zone because they know it's physical and they know one guy is going to win, one guy is going to lose, one guy is probably going to get run over. There have been a bunch of guys that have come through here that have gotten run over, prominent players that are playing on Sundays that have asked me to take the video off the server and I refuse to, because it's what football is. It's combative. It's competition.

We simplify it down to those three drills. If you can do those three drills as a cover man or as a blocker, again, that's kickoff coverage and kick return, if you can do those things, then you can go out and compete, and that's how we build our unit. That's how we build our system. Then we put it all together and we try to simplify it to that because if you don't, the field is 120 yards long, 53 and a third wide, and oh, my gosh, I have to block this one person on this huge field, when the reality is you have to block that person in a five-by-five box. So if you can do that, then you can help our unit.



We have guys that do it and do it well. We have more than the guys that are playing because our guys have bought in and are really working hard, but only 11 guys get to play right now.

But I feel like our guys understand. I feel like they're working hard at it. You go in the punt return game, there's the pressure piece of it, then there's the holdup at the line of scrimmage piece. Again, all stuff that we drill in competitive fashion. Then there's the trail phase where you have to make a decision, can I still make a block and finish on this guy or do I have to pull off like KJ, going back to him. First he rushes the punter and then all of a sudden realizes he can't catch up to everyone else, so the rule is if you can't be smart, turn around, find someone else, and he found the punter and put him right on his back. To me, that's how you finish. That's how you score touchdowns.

It takes guys to understand all that, and I think our guys are doing that right now. We've just got to continue doing it, continue working at it because there's more out there for us.

**Q. How do you find an 11 for a return, 11 for coverage beyond just running drills and seeing who rises? I imagine it factors in who's not on the two deeps or maybe you have to ask to see if a guy can get some reps for you. What do you look for in finding Matthew Slater-esque mentalities of just embracing special teams?**

LEVAR WOODS: I go back to it is those drills. People think it's not those drills. It is those drills. Like that's the opportunity for you to show us. Then we also watch all the offensive plays, the defensive plays. We watch the tape. Hey, he would be really good at this, he would be really good at that. Hey, this is very natural to him, which we've tried to do some things with players that aren't natural to them, and it doesn't always end up well.

So we just try to find out what they're natural at and what they do well and then continue to build on that and try to relay it from offense to special teams or defense to special teams and just try to keep it as simple as possible so guys can go fast.

When they go fast, they know what they're doing, they go fast, and they love each other, they care about each other, they compete, it's fun to watch. I'm telling you, that's what you guys are watching right now. It isn't like anything magical, mystical. It's hard work. It's understanding what you're doing each and every day and guys pushing each other and guys competing and guys wanting to win. Then also guys caring about each other.

**Q. Curious about the future of the kicking game because obviously this is Drew's last season. You have Caden Buhr. Do you think you'll look in the portal or high school ranks to bring guys in? How do you feel like Caden Buhr has come along? Where do you see the future of that room once Drew is gone?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, the future, man, I'm trying to focus on these next games so I can't tell you I'm going that far right now, but Caden, I think he's done a good job. Part of his plan was to come here early, to get in the mix and be with Drew, train with Drew. I think he's done a good job with that. You guys saw him in the spring game. You saw him in the kids day scrimmage. He's done a really good job, and he's been put in some situations -- I don't think Drew could have handled as a freshman, if you will. I think Caden has done a good job with it.

Again, I go back to the youth and inexperience, inconsistencies, things like that that we have to continue to build on, but very happy with him. Glad he's here. Just continue to build with him.

He's gotten one rep so far. In one rep he went in as a kickoff against I think UMass and did a really good job with it. Like better than I thought he could do.

So there's something in there with this kid, and I really like him, and I'm glad he's here.

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