

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, October 28, 2025

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Coach Tim Lester

Press Conference



TIM LESTER: I want to start out by really thanking the Iowa Hawkeye fans. Maybe I was just too nervous last year to realize the environment in Kinnick was quite what it is. I came from Lambeau, which is a pretty special environment, but the last two weeks it's been an unbelievable advantage -- I'm still in a box up there, and the sound comes through the windows, and what an atmosphere for our football team. It's been a lot of fun, so thank you to them.

I want to thank the seniors. We have a special group, Logan Jones, Beau Stephens, Gennings Dunker, Wetjen, Gill, Sam, Seth in the wideout room, Mark's in my room, obviously, Hayden Large, Addison Ostrenga in the tight end group. We have a great group that's kept our guys focused on just getting better each week.

Heading into the bye week, huge week for us, for the young guys, KJ Parker and Nathan McNeil, guys that need reps. Their time on task, muscle memory is a real thing, and this is our week older guys get to rest a little bit, still hopefully do some individual and get a little bit sharper on the things that we're working on, so hopefully we have a good week.

Today was a great day. Tomorrow will be another one.

But overall the group has done a great job of focusing on winning during the week. We always say you can't win on Saturday if you don't win during the week, and we've been getting after it on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and we're going to have to continue doing that because we have a lot of things to improve on, but I'm happy with just the way they're going about their business.

Q. I realize you only have four games left, but what is a realistic expectation for where this passing game can go from here over the next month? Obviously we'd love to see 350 yards, but what's realistic for you right now?

TIM LESTER: Yeah, that's a good question because it depends on who we play, what they're giving us, what our

match-ups look like. I really felt going into the Indiana game we were climbing, and obviously one injury in particular slowed that up a little bit.

But I feel like we're getting back, we're getting healthy again. We're throwing the ball more accurately than we did last week.

But we have to keep at it. The plays haven't changed. We came close on a couple big ones last week. I am calling it the same way.

It also depends on how the game goes. We had two interesting games where we had a 30-point lead and with 10 minutes left in the third -- so that changes things when you get in a shootout kind of like Rutgers, it's a different style of game. So I want to see them continue to improve and run the routes with the right technique, quarterbacks getting through the progressions like they should, getting to their launch points. They're doing a really good job of getting to their launch points. We took two sacks last week, both on the quarterback. Had a chance to throw it, hesitated and ended up taking a sack when the ball could have come out. Our line was doing a great job, so he knows that.

That's the fun part about coaching Mark is you rarely have to correct him. He normally tells me what I'm about to say, like I have to hit that. You're like, yes. Because I was about to say that.

So it's fun to have a guy that really gets it and is trying to improve and understand what is we're trying to do. We have to continue to get better doing it.

Q. I think the last time we met with you, you kind of hinted that something was going on with Hecklinski, that he was on the move up the charts. What have you seen from him? How would you characterize that race at the backup position right now?

TIM LESTER: It's close. They're both young, right, but he had had a really good day. The day I talked to you, he had had a phenomenal day, and he had a great Wednesday of that first bye week.

Just understanding the offense, seeing where the ball needs to go, having the confidence. He has great

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anticipation. He hasn't had to use it much thus far but still has a lot to learn. Made some mistakes today but made some huge throws today, as well.

You know, his anticipation is something that is natural to him, and he needs more reps. Running the plays where we get the coverage we want, understanding the timing of it and where to put the ball. Whereas Hank, who's had a great day today, he needs to work better on when plays break down. Hank is really good when the picture is clear -- it's everything that every young quarterback goes through, and they're all a little different, and you're trying to get them to the same place.

But Heck has done a great job. He's been relaxed when he went in there. RPO decisions have been solid. I wanted him to dump the ball off on the inverted triple option, but he chose to run it in, which is fine, which is weird because I would not have bet that he would not have passed that up and took it himself.

He was pretty excited to get in the paint, so it was fun to see. But he's continuing to get better, and they're competing.

This is a big week for them. Today was a good day, and tomorrow will be another one.

Q. With such an established offensive line and probably one of the most dominant run blocking, you finally have your full plethora of running backs back. With so many different guys that you can go to in the running back room with that offensive line, does it take pressure off the pass game to progress as quickly as you'd like it to do and give some of the younger receivers a chance to breathe a little bit and actually go through the process of improving? How are you approaching that?

TIM LESTER: That's a good question. I would think every offensive coordinator in the United States would answer yes to that question. Anytime you can run the ball, it takes pressure off your pass game, period. Increases the chances of your play pass and movement game. I really feel like in the last couple weeks, Kamari has really taken steps as far as breaking tackles, falling forward.

I think we got shoestrung tackled in the first five weeks more than any team in the history of teams. If we blocked a 5-yard run, we got five. If we blocked a 4-yard run, we got four. We never blocked a 4-yard run and got 10.

We've just been starting to do that. X, and it's great to have Jaz back. When 2-yard runs or 4-yard runs become 8-yard runs, that gets you into 2nd and short. Everyone

knows the playbook is wide open on 2nd and short. The answer is 100 percent yes. Obviously those guys up front are playing at a high level, so having that in your back pocket does make it a lot more fun to call an offense.

Q. From a physical perspective, physical traits perspective, has Mark changed what you're looking for in recruiting at all, and from an intangibles perspective, how rare is it to find a guy who has that desire to get better and has that leadership ability that he's shown through his eight games?

TIM LESTER: Yeah, it's extremely special, just the leadership qualities of him and when he stepped in the huddle against Wisconsin, because I wasn't sure if he was going to play, like we were going to win that game. Our guys were going to play so hard for him because he was out there gutting it out and probably not feeling great but he was out there anyway.

Recruiting-wise, I've had a lot of quarterbacks that can throw the ball that are smart, that learn how to play on time. I've had some that were quick enough to go get a 1st down. I've had some like Sully that runs like a wide receiver. I've never had one that runs like a fullback, though. This is the first. That's where it's unique because some of the -- we still use him on the edge. You saw the first touchdown. There's still things you can do because he can run well on the edges.

But probably not as dynamic as Sully was, but man, being able to run counter with your quarterback is super unique.

I don't know how easy those guys are to find. If I could find one, I'm all in. But they're definitely a unique group. It takes a lot of pressure off the offense in the red zone and on short yardage, which is a huge part. Gives us just more time to focus on his footwork, his timing. He got through his progressions a couple times, he'll be the first to tell you that we were off balance a little bit. The ball accuracy wasn't where we needed it to be, and that's something he can do. He's just getting comfortable. He's wearing a brace on his front knee now, which it's different to throw with that thing on. He's getting more comfortable with it.

I think it's just going to continue to get better.

Q. Curious about with Jeremy, he's only really been here for a few months. How have you seen him progress, I guess, from when he first got here to this point?

TIM LESTER: Really, I think one of the things that's unique about him is his timing. He gets rid of the ball quick now. He doesn't have to get his feet set. He can just blink



and the ball is gone, which is different than Mark. Mark gets his feet set, gets it underneath him, so it takes him sometimes a little bit longer.

The biggest thing for him was time on task and understanding the play and where we're trying to hit it because once he understands the play, then his skills really show. Early on he was trying to run that play, the timing of the play, what he's looking at, what kind of RPO is it, what kind of check is it, run check wise. He had a couple run checks in the game I was proud of him, it's not something I think he's done a ton.

That's the biggest thing is the more he's around it, the more he understands where we're going and why we're going there and the timing of the whole thing, he's got an unbelievable hard count, he got them to jump on the first play.

He's starting to get comfortable with it, and then his skills can start showing you even more because he can start using them within the offensive structure, right.

That was his biggest thing is how long can he be around it because what he did in high school and at Wake is a lot different than here, so he's embraced it. He made a check out there today that was awesome. I don't think anybody that was in there with him knew the check, but it was the right check. He had to tell everybody what to do to get the play off, but it was impressive.

He's really coming along, which has been fun to see.

Q. When you came up with the concept here of the mid-zone run and you explained it to, I'm sure, Kirk and also to George and Ladell at the time, did you plan on teaching it to them for them to extend it to teach it to whether it was George, the linemen or Ladell or Omar to the running backs, or did you explain the concepts and let George decide, okay, this is what our aiming points are going to be, or did you work with them on that? How did that all come together?

TIM LESTER: It was a crazy couple months; I can tell you that. What a unique opportunity to come in here and work at a place like this with an offensive line like this with some tight ends and running backs when it comes to the run game.

But I was the only one that knew it. Obviously Coach had been around a similar system, so they knew it a little bit, but I had to teach everybody everything. So we sat in that staff room for oh, my Lord, hours on end, and I tried to teach them as much as I could as if I was the O-line coach, as if I was the tight end coach and the wide out coach.

It was long, and then we went through spring ball and we actually did install meetings my first spring. I ran them so we were all together, which doesn't happen anymore. We put a play in, Abdul takes a type, we all go our separate ways to really detail it up. But the first spring it was just me in a room trying to hit everybody at the same time so they could hear from one voice.

Then as soon as spring ended, we went up to Green Bay because they were ready to go ask the pros. I couldn't get that deep like Luke Butkus or some of those guys. They get into it. I think we had better questions by that point because we had already kind of gone 15 practices against our defense. Bud had a lot of good questions. I hate when they spin away, like what angle do you have them take on this backside cutoff, stuff like that.

It was really just all of us in a room communicating about what they've done. We had tons of film from all different places. A lot of it was from our system. But I've been running this run scheme for a bit, so I had some old Division III film I showed them as far as our aiming points and why I liked the aiming points the way they are.

Then you explained it to Dunk, and Dunk was like, I get to go through that guy? Yeah. He's like, this is awesome. I'm like, yeah, you don't have to position block him, go through him. So that actually fits him beautifully, this run scheme, at least the mid-zone does.

So yeah, it started off as a group. I think I did the best I could before we went up to Green Bay, and we made little adjustments. I have two unbelievable offensive line coaches here. George has done a phenomenal job getting that group to where it is now, and of course Coach Ferentz is sitting at the end of the table, so it's pretty unique to be sitting in a room with guys with that much knowledge in the run game, and they've added things to it, which has been good, so it's been fun for two seasons to -- you have to stay ahead of the curve because guys are doing different things and it seems like sometimes we see adjustments to every defense for our outside zone scheme because you don't see a lot of it.

So you kind of prepare for one front and then you get this totally safety standing in the middle of the box last week, which they had never shown, but there's some new stuff we have to adjust to on the fly, and we've just been together long enough that we're doing a better job of making the adjustments, in game, too, because we are seeing -- not every day, but we are seeing some unique stuff because those five guys up front and those tight ends, they're blocking at a pretty high level right now.

Q. Two-parter on Mark: In some rewatches, it kind of seems like his throws that he misses are overthrows maybe a little bit late. How do you adjust to that? Am I correct when I say that?

TIM LESTER: Sometimes, yes.

Q. The second part, I know you said you offered the opportunity to check into plays last year, didn't really happen. Is that gratifying for you to see Mark do that, and maybe why does he have the confidence --

TIM LESTER: You saw him in and out of a ton this weekend. He went into one, into the one and then reracked the other one. I'm like, we just went into a play, out of a play, back into a play. Him and No. 3, they were literally staring at each other, like what are you going to do. He'd back up and he would go like this and then he'd come down and he'd do this, so we can go all day. He ended up picking the right one because the guy spun to the middle and we ran counter.

We had a deceptive play that he got out of and then turned it back on, and I wish he would have just stayed out of it because the safety was messing with him and the safety won that one.

But yeah, it's been a lot of fun to watch his knowledge of the run game and being in control -- it started at Rutgers; he was on it. It doesn't mean you're going to gash him when you run at their weakness, but the more you do it, when you hit it, you're going to hit it. Two-yard runs or 4-yard runs, he just was able to get us into plays.

Give credit to everybody when you're calling two plays in the huddle. Those guys are all dialed into which way when you're going on, off, to rerack it. So that part is fun.

As far as the passing game, yeah, the biggest thing is he sailed two corner routes, kind of locked out of his front knee. He has to balance that front knee out. He's leading his back hip really well right now because that's the healthy one. He's actually playing lower, which I like. He has a ton of power. We have to control that front leg. He's getting more and more comfortable with the -- you have to twist. You have to rotate through that thing. When he gets it locked out, it sails. He has such a strong arm, it never comes down, it just keeps going. I think one of those corner routes might have landed in the stands, was like two weeks ago.

Then when he bends it too much, then he ends up being low. So he has kind of a low and high thing going on right now, which we can fix. It's just time on task.

These are things that weren't issues pre, and they're showing up a couple times now, and as soon as he sees it, we talk about it, we drill it, and it's gone. I'm kind of hoping that's the same process that we go through with this.

But then he throws some great ones. He's scrambling, he's using his legs. That 3rd down was -- they played zone, he had to progress through, got out, phase 2, phase 3, and then found Jacob Gill, did a great job with the scramble, plus vertical, there's one on top of him, snap back, 1st down, that's the first time in seven years since I've been here. Even though we've been practicing scramble drill trying to get better at it.

There's some things that are really coming along, and there's some things that we've got to continue to work on.

Q. Just wanted to ask about what Warren and Billy have brought to their roles, particularly Warren and his cut-offs and what they do to prep every week.

TIM LESTER: It's awesome. I just came out of the meeting. We've been in there for about an hour and a half, of just Billy and Warren's presentation. They've been watching Oregon since last Wednesday, and so they summarize everything we're going to see, they make cut-ups, we all sit and watch together, and we'll start game planning probably tomorrow on it.

But having someone two or three days ahead -- it's unbelievable -- like last year we'd start watching on Sunday night and then you'd have to put a game plan together which you've only watched like an hour or two of film, which feels horrible inside, and then you start -- really you start getting settled with the defense. I was the same way as a quarterback. It got to the point on Tuesday and Wednesday if I closed my eyes, all I saw was this defense, and I knew the number in 9 and 11 and 42. I knew where everybody was. That's the only thing that was in my head. The problem is by that time our week of practice was over, and it's like, do you really want to put one play in that you think is going to be really good.

So they've been able to speed all of us up by having all that information on day one. They have their ideas out there that have obviously been thought through many, many times from two really smart dudes. It's helped us. I think it's helped the scheme. We've been able to add our things to it and make adjustments to tie plays together. They actually meet before they present where they can tie the run and the pass together, the shifts, the motions to make plays look like plays and then I'll normally add a couple more things.

It's been working how I was hoping it would work, and



they've done a phenomenal job. It's great to have Warren in the room because when we're talking about if something comes up or have they ever done this blitz with that coverage behind, if I don't know it, I can just turn to him and get the answer immediately.

Our room, it's a good room. It's great to have them in there.

Q. I wanted to ask about Reece getting back into the mix now that he had that weird injury two days before the first game of the year --

TIM LESTER: Weird is right.

Q. Obviously his height is a major advantage, particularly with this receiving room. How have you seen him get back into the swing of things through these three games?

TIM LESTER: Yeah, that injury hurt him. It's hard. He's worked hard to become a good receiver, right, and for some reason, he's a slow starter, so last spring, first two weeks of spring, he was getting his feet wet, and he wasn't getting separation. Then by the end of spring he was getting after people.

Then this training camp, same thing. First couple weeks he did not really stand out, and then man, he really hit it, and then he had the injury.

So he came back two weeks ago, and Coach Bud is all fired up. I'm like, it's going to be a week or two to get him back, to get him back-back, just to get your feet wet and the game slows down a little bit.

He does an unbelievable job in the blocking department. Like just having a guy, you're like, hey, throw it up. Great job by Mark going through the progression. We knew we had one-on-one back there, he put it up high and let him go make a play. Hopefully that's one of many.

I remember last year at Michigan State he had a dig that we kind of threw behind him and over, and then we threw him up a one-on-one, and he made a play, and I was like, here it is, like this is a guy. Then after that game is when we found out he was hurt and out for the rest of the year.

So I'm really hoping for his sake -- he's worked so hard to get to this point, that he can just start stacking games together because it's great to have that height.

Dayton is another guy that's long that can go. Talk about the young guys, KJ Parker is a guy who's super dynamic. You finally got to see it, which is good, on special teams,

which is huge, and he's just going to continue to get better and better.

The young guys are -- and then they have the four seniors in the room that know what they're doing and they all bring their own -- something different to the table. But they don't bring height to the table, and the two young guys do.

It was great to see him go out there and make a play, and hopefully that's one of many.

Q. I wanted to ask about Logan Jones who just got honored with a national recognition today. He's a guy who came back in this room this year with lots of experience already. Talk about how much that helps having a guy like that stepping in already with some experience and leadership ability, how much that helps the rest of that offensive line room.

TIM LESTER: I mean, I can't even think of the right word. For a center to have that much experience -- we put a lot on him, and what he's doing athletically up front for us and identifying fronts is really special, but what he does for the protections -- I don't know if I'd say Mark is in charge. I always say the quarterback is in charge, but we let our center do a ton, and Mark can trump if he needs to and say I'm going to overtake this, I see something different, but it's not like you ever have to do with that LoJo. He's on it. He sees all the multiple fronts. He gets us where we need to be, communicates with the quarterback and the running back to let them know what we're doing. That part is pretty special, and what he's doing post-snap, coming off the ball, climbing to the second level. We ran that reverse last week just so he could get out and run in front. He told me, if I'm going back in, I want to run the reverse. I said, we'll run it first play. Sure enough, he got out in front -- he loves that play because he gets to pull. Centers don't get to pull much and get in space, but he wanted it, and it's his favorite play.

But yeah, what he's doing for the whole group is really special. He's like the quarterback out there. You have Mark and LoJo in the middle and they're making a lot of decisions for you, you've got to feel pretty good about us getting into the right call at the right time, especially with some of the multiple fronts we're seeing. He's on it, he's making calls, and really making it easier for our offense to have success.

Q. I wanted to ask about the first drive last Saturday against Minnesota, big topic of conversation, why does Kirk always take the ball first. You watch any football broadcasts and the play-by-play broadcaster will say, well, here come the scripted plays. I'm curious, take me up in the booth; is there really 15, 20

plays you have that you know you want to run first? Obviously you didn't have that same success on the opening drive against Penn State; what changed on this one? What did you learn from this opening drive that you can take forward into the final four games?

TIM LESTER: Hmm, that's a good question. It was definitely scripted. That's the easy answer. Normally I've had as low as 11 and up to 18. It really depends how many slots I have left on my call sheet. I think last week it was like 15, 16.

Now, those are 1st and 2nd down calls. Everyone is different depending on what we're trying to see. There's certain times I want to see if they have an unbalanced check. I have to get that done in the first 10. I want to see in 11 or 12 in certain formations how they're going to play us. Definitely want to move the pocket as fast as possible. Want to get the D-line, start to get them tired as fast as I can, try to get them sideline to sideline.

So there's a lot of different things that go into that. But last week I just thought our guys did a great job executing. The first play we ran that play for a reason. We wanted to see what the Will linebacker did, we wanted to send a message to them that if they tried to fit this certain run play that way, you couldn't, and Mark pulled it, they covered him, and Mark ran for eight yards, which we knew if they covered it well, he'd be free to go get some yards.

The Wej screen was -- obviously we've been running that play fairly well. Gets harder and harder to hide him, but he's starting to become better, a better wide receiver, which is fun. But we ran that same play last week and we ran the bubble to him, so this time we brought him back underneath. The lineman did an unbelievable job of getting downfield.

But I come off that script on 3rd down in the red zone, so I think of that first 15, on that first drive we probably used -- you guys probably know how many plays it was. It goes fast for me up there. Probably we used six of them, six or seven, and then we go to the 3rd down, I go to the 3rd down calls, we hit the 25-yard line, I'm in a different box and I go back to it.

There was a game last year, it was Minnesota last year, I think I had like 20 openers, and I didn't even get -- at halftime I wasn't done with them because you end up in the red zone and you're not even in the openers. It's just open field, first 10, first 15, whatever it is.

Nothing better than scoring on the first drive. Guys did a good job -- that 3rd down was huge. I wish we would have hit the play pass because we felt pretty solid about that

thing. We just didn't execute it well enough.

I think our guys are going to get better and better. Last year we deferred a lot. I know Coach likes to take the ball, and it's exciting for us because especially when you're playing a team that you know they're going to defer. There's like a 95 percent chance we're taking the ball. Like we know it going in. I think our guys are excited about it, and we've just got to come out and be focused right away and come off the ball, and I think we did a good job of that last week.

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