

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: I hope everybody had a good bye week. I think it was productive for us. It gave us a chance to recharge, regroup and get ready for this last four-week block.

It was positive for our team to move along a little bit, and then I think we did some positive work, certainly the last three games out, bye week to bye week. This is always an important stretch for everybody in college football, so bracing up for a four-game block here as we move forward.

Then on that topic, obviously a lot of respect. Certainly everybody here has great respect for the Oregon program and what they've done, specifically the team that they're putting on the field this year. They've done a great job. Off to a great start.

Pertaining to that game, our captains are the same four guys: Hurkett, Entringer, Gronowski and Logan Jones.

Injury-wise, nothing new to speak of. I think we're in pretty good shape relatively for this time of year. No big deal there.

Then in football, really tape is your résumé. If you look at Oregon tape or watch them on TV, obviously they're a good football team in all three phases, do a great job. I think the bottom line is they're an aggressive football team. They're sound, talented, and well-coached. Coach Lanning has done a great job there in a short period of time. Specifically you look back the last two years, there aren't many losses on their résumé. They've been playing at a high level.

That's with some new players this year, too. That's been impressive. They've recruited extremely well. They have a veteran team, but they've also got a lot of young guys that are involved, too, especially in the back end. Skill positions, guys that are freshmen that are playing big, big roles and doing a good job. It's an impressive mix and array.

Offensively, I don't even know where you start. They're

good up front, which allows them to do a lot of things. Good quarterback play, good line play, and then they've got good skill positions. The tight ends, they got a two-deep there. It's impressive.

Receiver corps is extremely talented, and then they have three backs that are clipping right along and doing a great job there.

Defensively, they're a disruptive team. Very aggressive, very talented, very disruptive. Again, well-coached on that thing.

Then special teams, they do great job there. They have good specialists and a lot of good core players that clearly take a lot of pride in what they're doing. It will be a big challenge for us certainly, and look forward to that coming up on Saturday.

Talk about the Kid Captain. We have Harper Atkinson, who is with us from Wapello. Harper and her twin brother, Knox, were born over in Stead Family Hospital a couple of years back. Both of them, great young kids.

Knox was born with cerebral palsy, so that certainly was a tough diagnosis. Then about two years later Harper started undergoing -- she had spontaneous bone breaking, and they diagnosed her with a rare bone disease. So that's what her situation is.

She's had 11 surgeries, several procedures, spent a lot of time over there, but is really doing well as a fourth grader. I'm told she's very active, loves school, loves riding horses, piano, singing. You know, all those things. Just a great personality.

It will be really good to have her and her family with us on Saturday. Looking forward to that.

Just wrapping it up here, obviously a big week this week for everybody. A lot of interest in this game certainly on the outside, and I think the key for us is trying to keep our focus really where it needs to be. We have our hands more than full trying to get ready for Oregon.

I'll throw it out and answer any questions.

Q. Over the years you've had countless great leaders

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on your offense, defense, quarterbacks, wherever it may be, but everybody always reflects back upon you and the leadership you've brought to the table. When you go into a game like this, kind of a prime time matchup, how do you balance between I don't want to say over-coaching your team or over-motivating your team, and how much do you leave up to the player leadership to fill in that gap?

KIRK FERENTZ: Two things on that front. You're right, I think we've had really good leadership here over the years. It's been interesting, but this year especially because we've lost some really dynamic guys the last couple of years. So you go back to January, when we got started, and this group kind of collectively has done a great job. It's been that way January on. They've built on that, so it has been diffused, in my mind.

A lot of other guys have joined. Mark wasn't with us last year, but obviously he's been a great addition to some of the newer guys that have joined right in there. So, yeah, it's been more of a collective type thing.

A game like this, there's not a lot I need to say, quite frankly. All the guys have to do is look at the film, look at the numbers, and that gets your attention. We know what we're up against here in terms of a challenge.

I think the biggest thing right now in my job is to try to keep them focused on what we're doing and not all the other stuff going on. There is a lot going on, I'm sure, but the challenge for us is on the field. Right now it's on the film.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Mark. I know we've touched on this a little bit. Some players seem to have that "it" when it comes to winning, maybe goes beyond the numbers. What is it about Mark that you saw and he continues to prove about why he can lead a program to win and just keep on winning?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think he does have a record for that, right? I think that's correct. I've read the game notes and all that stuff.

To me things don't happen accidentally. It's not the same as when I think about Jovon Johnson. We recruited him 25 years ago or whatever it would have been. There was nothing about him physically necessarily that stood out. He wasn't tall enough, wasn't quite fast enough, but he's playing for Mercyhurst Prep School in Erie, Pennsylvania. Not exactly a huge school, but he just did everything well, and his team won.

Ed Hinkel was the same way when he was at Cathedral Prep. His teams won. Some guys I don't think it's a

coincidence sometimes. They're part of that. They're not the sole right now, but they're part of it.

In Mark's case that's certainly what it's been since he went to college. To me the most interesting thing was no Big Ten schools offered him, and I'm assuming no MAC schools offered him either, because he ended up at South Dakota State, which is a great program. At an early point in his career he had great success, which is really unusual for a guy that young, and then it's continued.

There's something about him maybe that didn't quite measure up, didn't meet this specification or that specification, but bottom line, it's about production and getting the job done. He has certainly has done that.

Q. This weekend is the military appreciation game. It's typically when your team will wear the American flag Tigerhawk on the right side of your helmet. Why is it important for your program to honor those who have served this country with that very visible reflection of your appreciation, and why is that a tradition that's endured since 2009?

KIRK FERENTZ: To the bigger point and the most important point is toward the military, we honor somebody each and every week, which I think is a nice touch. Obviously service is important, but I think also the sacrifice, and that's a huge to me component of people that do serve in the military.

For them it's a way of life, and I'm sure it's in their blood a little bit. At least that's been my experience in visiting with people that do it for quite a while, but then you talk about the sacrifice part of it. Coaches love to talk about how hard they work and all that. I mean, you know, the life of a career military person is not easy for anybody, and to be a spouse of somebody who is in the military and then to raise a family under those conditions, I think it takes special people.

I think all of us are appreciative of their service, but also appreciative of the sacrifices that they make. That truly is a life of service. Hats off to everybody.

Then we play a kids' game, right? We're getting celebrated as people out there playing a kids' game, but all the stuff we get to do in our country came with a price, so very appreciative of that as well.

Q. You look back on the wall. You see Jack Campbell, Cooper DeJean, Jay Higgins, the last three years as defensive stars. Who would you say this year's defensive star is?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll go back to the leadership thing. It's really been a group effort.

A quick illustration, just to cherry-pick is Jaden went down a couple of weeks ago with a knee sprain, and Jayden Montgomery stepped in and has done a great job, and we've continued to play well. It's been a collective effort.

Obviously we have some guys that are emerging right now and doing a good job there, but I think they would be mad at me if I started singling guys out. That's been a really collective effort. Everyone is playing well right now and playing together.

Most importantly, a lot of the guys on the team that are playing currently are a lot better than they were a year ago. That's how things happen. When you graduate guys like the guys you mentioned, which is part of college football, somebody has to be coming along, and those guys have done a great job stepping up.

Q. I wanted to ask you, Kirk, about the mid-zone run you guys implemented last year. What was the conversation like when Tim kind of described what he wanted to do, because obviously it marries every part of the team, George, you, and wide receivers and running backs, but then also, when did you feel like that people started to get comfortable with it, aiming points, where the running back, his vision and everything, when did it feel like that became a core play in this offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't think it was really that tough of a transition or integration into the system, because it really fits in pretty seamlessly with what we've been doing. So, I think it gives us a little bit more variety in a way.

It really wasn't that much of an adjustment. I think it was a matter of repetition, getting guys comfortable where it becomes natural. To me, all we've done is add to our arsenal a little bit, and I think it's probably made the other parts a little bit more effective as well.

But, yeah, it's repetition, like anything you do. You're always learning. That's one great thing about football. At least that's been my experience. I always reference my six years in the NFL. I was always fascinated. It was rare when a day -- by the end of the day something would have happened, something you see on film that you just never had thought about. As much film as you watch and you see something else, it makes you think about something. So I guess this kind of fits in that chapter a little bit.

Hopefully it makes us a little bit more effective in what we're trying to do.

Q. As much as rest and rehab is important during a bye week, when you have the three-week stretch that you guys did before last week, how do you continue to keep the momentum going when there's this mandatory pause and no one is really playing an opponent?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a good question. I'm not sure if I have the answer. We'll find out here in a month. Yeah, it's one of the things you think about certainly.

We were actually talking about that the other day. Rita and I were talking about it, because she talks to the coaches. Phil is grumpy because he didn't want to have a bye week. The point that I was going to bring up there, in 2002 our bye week was after the season. We played all of our games, and then the last week of the year was our bye week. Everybody else is playing, and we were sitting at home.

That year it was a good thing, because we were picking up momentum as we were going along. The other key component with that was one guy got hurt that entire year. If you go back and look, we had one starter miss time, if I'm not mistaken. I am pretty sure it was one of our corners.

So we were so healthy. Just unusually healthy. Yeah, keep playing then. That hasn't been the case. We've had a lot of guys with just things that have been nagging them.

It's a chance for everybody really to get healthy and back to where they can maybe go for four weeks hard now hopefully. Then I think part of it's maturity. It's just how you handle things. There's a break there. We knew that back in June what the schedule was, so how are we going to deal with that, how are we going to handle with that?

We can be smart about it or we can get distracted and start thinking about stupid stuff, and then it's a little tougher to get back to where we need to get.

Q. The last time Oregon came to Kinnick, you were the O-line coach. What do you remember from that 1989 game?

KIRK FERENTZ: I remember it didn't go well. You teed it up for me. I'll burn some clock on this one.

What I remember -- and I've shared this with people -- I didn't know much about Oregon in 1989. None of us really did. A handful of us, I guess about three of us, went out to Southern Cal and spent a couple of days basically to watch them practice in the spring, but also to learn about Oregon, because obviously they were in the same conference.



At that time I would compare them like to me -- and I can't give you the year, but when Don James went to Washington. All of a sudden that program ascended. It was like, wow, how did that happen? Where did that come from?

They were really good, and then Oregon at that time was not -- it was before Nike and all that stuff, the uniforms, all that stuff. None of that was going on.

What we found on that trip was just how good they are and how good they had been quietly. Then we found out firsthand. It was a good football team. I think Rich Brooks was a guy who was kind of the coach of that organization and got them going. They were good through the '90s, and then they've exploded this last 25 years.

The common denominator is they've had really good coaches and really good players. They've recruited well. Nike, all that stuff gives them a little bit more of a national recognition that they didn't have maybe 30 years ago, 40 years ago, but they were a good team right then. They had some really good players. I remember that.

It's just grown since then, so they're an impressive outfit. There's a reason they've lost two games the last two years. I mean, they're good.

Q. First, Beau Stephens, is he doing okay?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's fine, yeah.

Q. Beyond the fact that they're good teams, do you see any parallels between Indiana and Oregon, and what do you feel like from that Indiana game, things that you guys learned that you need to get better on or do the same, I guess, against Oregon?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we had a great game out there with Indiana. I'll start there. It was just a great football game, one of the better ones I've been involved in career-wise. We're built differently a little bit. They've got some differences. I think what they feature is probably a little different than what we feature, but the bottom line is it was two really good teams in a really competitive game.

Then they went out there, and they've played well against everybody from what I can tell this year. We haven't seen them on film since -- well, we saw them against Oregon. The one common denominator is Indiana doesn't beat themselves. If you open the door at all for Oregon, you're going to pay real quickly. They did a good job of making Oregon having to work in all three phases.

Then they made some plays that were tough plays, and you got to make them tough -- you're going to have to find a way to do that, whether it's a pass or run. You're going to have to do some things maybe that aren't predictable.

I'm thinking of a receiver making a play in this game for Indiana, he made a great catch, and then somehow, he made a run to get a first down. That was a good play. Then one of the touchdowns was a really good individual effort.

So whether it's doing that or maybe you do it in the run game, or maybe you do it some other way, but you're going to have to find some ways that aren't maybe just conventional or routine I guess is a better word to use on that one, because they just make you work. They got guys at every position. They can make it really tough on you.

That's what Indiana did, and last year it was, I guess, Ohio State in the bowl game there at the end of the year -- playoff game, I should say. Not many people have been able to do it. These guys are really good.

Q. I wanted to ask about Harrell, Montgomery. How are you going to distribute the workload?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll probably start out with Jayden/(Jaden). How is that for an answer, huh? Got you on that one. No, we'll start out with Montgomery. I didn't spell it.

We'll start out with Montgomery. Harrell is coming along. I think he's pretty close to being 100%. If he has to play, he'll play, but we have confidence in both right now.

Q. You mentioned the buzz of this game. Fans are excited. We talked to all the players. They're excited. They all talked about this is why they come to play college football on the big stage to play in these games. I wanted to ask about yourself. You've been coaching a long time. Do these types of games that seem to have a little more juice to them, do you still get revved up for them and the excitement and walking out there and the energy about playing a top-10 team in Kinnick Stadium?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's really special and rare. That will never get old. At least I don't think it will. If it does, that's probably when it's time to pack it up.

Any time you get a chance to go against a premiere team, which these guys are, it's a great measuring stick. You realize a lot of things can go wrong. Coaches have a better ability of doing that than hopefully the players.

When it's all said and done, yeah, it's great to have an opportunity to play. I coached at Maine, coached at Worcester Academy, and those are all special too, but this is really a great environment in Kinnick any time there's a marquee matchup, if you will, and we have had a few of them over the last couple of decades. It's always special.

There's one thing for sure. I know Oregon is going to be ready, and I know they're good. I know our crowd is going to be ready, and the thing we have to focus on is making sure we're ready to go, because it's going to take every bit of our best performance to have a chance to win this game.

Q. To face Oregon at this point in the season when you guys have been growing and improving each week leading up to it, what areas or how are you guys in better shape to play them than if you played them earlier this season?

KIRK FERENTZ: Historically our best teams have gotten better as the year went on. The exception to that rule might be you could argue in '09 where we lost two in November. Ricky Stanzi blew his ankle out there in I guess it would have been the tenth game or whatever it would have been. That was a tough one.

Traditionally, we typically get a little bit better as the year goes on. I think we've done that this year. Certainly I think we're better equipped right now maybe to compete against a team like this, but all that being said, it's still going to be a heck of a challenge.

Yeah, I certainly would rather be playing somebody in this type of game in November.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Oregon and maybe the way that they use NIL and the portal. It's not about the money, but specifically they had an outstanding team last year that was undefeated and Big Ten champion, ranked No. 1. Lost a lot of pieces. Yet, their portal use seemed to really just plug in, and they've all maximized their abilities. What have you noticed? Have they changed much, or are they schematically pretty similar? Moore is different than Gabriel, but with the players they have, how are they maybe different than what they were last year, and how have they remained maybe similar?

KIRK FERENTZ: To me, more similar than different in my mind. Let's start with the quarterback. He's a guy that can hurt you in a lot of different ways, and same thing last year. They got a guy that can run around and make some plays, and in that Penn State game he made a couple that were really, really impressive and gave them a chance to win a

really tough ball game. It starts there.

They probably did as much work with the offensive line as any other spot, I'm guessing. I don't work there, and I don't want to presume I know what Dan was thinking, but it looks like they targeted that as an area where they needed a little bit more experience, and they've remedied that really well. They've got three transfers playing in that position -- or in that group, I should say.

Then the rest of it is kind of like strategic and where they need it. They've done a really good job there, and I mentioned the freshmen. I'm impressed with how many young players they have that are really contributing in a really impactful way.

Then I'll throw in, they got two D-linemen that roll out there. Like all their guys, they look like NFL guys. These two guys were in high school a year ago. I think it's 50 and 42. They fit right in with anybody anywhere in the country.

They've done a really nice job recruiting, and I'll say this, too. It's kind of like the Dodgers where you go back when Torre was managing the Yankees. Just having talent is not always enough. You have to utilize your talent and put people in the right places and get them playing the right ways, and they've done a great job of that. They've really done a great job of that for a long time now. There's an art to that, too.

So I've got a lot of respect for their talent, their ability, but more so how they're coached and how they play. That's really the end of the discussion. It's about how you play, and they've done a really good job of that.

Q. I wanted to ask about a couple of the intangible things. Number one, coming off a bye week, executed it beautifully last time at Wisconsin. Probably couldn't have gone too much better. Secondly, just as a November underdog the last two times, November home underdog the last two times were 16 against Michigan, 17 against Ohio State.

KIRK FERENTZ: I didn't know that.

Q. I guess those dynamics, how can you tap into those two things?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the commonalities are two big hills to climb in both those teams. Those were big challenges. I'm not into point spreads. I remember the Michigan game, because what we did the week before and then we were 28-point underdogs. I use that one obviously trying to make sure everybody is aware of what the reality was.

The other point spread I couldn't allude to, but I'm not surprised we were underdogs. Again, I circle right back. We've got to be ready to play well. Part of it's just, you know, out of reality of what the situation is. These guys can make it a lot to a little fast if you're not careful.

The parallel with all these games is you're playing a team that's really talented, well-coached each and every play. It's not critical, but it's important. You just have to do your job, because if you leave the door open at all, they have the ability to really make you pay for it. Maybe more severely than some other teams. That's kind of the way it is in all three phases.

You just have to be at our best, and that's all we've tried to convey to our players is the challenge is there's no plays off. You can't have a bad play or not be on task mentally any play. If they get you on ability, so be it, but you can't open the door because of a mental flaw or something that you could have done better with.

I think that's how you have to go into these games, just having a realistic appreciation for the challenge, and then you have to play your best football. That's all you can do, and that's what you're supposed to do anyway.

From that standpoint, it's a good thing, but yeah, it will be interesting.

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