

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: So just look backward here for a quick second, obviously we are disappointed with the outcome over the weekend and came up short in that game. I thought our guys had great attitude and worked really hard, handled the week well. And USC did a great job in that second half, so give them credit. They made the plays that needed to be made.

Sunday the guys came in with a great attitude, like every week, looked at the tape and learn from it, see what we can take away from each experience and really try to focus on the details of improvement. And then after that we move forward.

I think the team has the right mindset. We've had great leadership. I've talked about that for quite a while, and it's been really consistent. That's critically important, certainly. And, again, it's all about moving on afterwards. Started that process yesterday morning.

Getting ready for Michigan State. We have the same four captains with Hurkett, Entringer, Gronowski and Logan Jones.

Several guys injured in the ballgame the other day. Nobody's really ruled out 100 percent yet for this week. We got a handful of guys right now that we'll see how the week goes, and hopefully they can progress so we're not too, too depleted there. But it was a physical game, tough game from that regard.

Michigan State, you take a look at their record, I think that's one story, I think more important than that, to me, is looking at the team and how they've performed. A little bit like last year, they started out 3 and 0 overall and then we played them week four of the Big Ten schedule. They were 0 and 3, and not sure we had the right mindset for the game, and they basically jumped on us and kept the lead the entire game, made it tough on us.

You look at them this season, same thing, they started out 3 and 0. They had a tough stretch in there for a while, but the thing that's caught my attention, and hopefully our

team's attention, is what they've done the last two weeks, playing Minnesota through an overtime game three weeks ago with a bye week in there and then last week. 55 minutes into the game it's 14-10, playing at home against Penn State, who is a very talented football team.

So like any Michigan State team, seems like they have talented players. They have a mix of young and old a little bit, probably playing a few younger guys more than they like, but they have talented football players. They're very capable.

I am just looking at the way they played the last two weeks, and that's about all we need to do right now.

The last part of it is just you're in Big Ten play. Anytime you're in conference play in November, expect it to be tough. Typically is. So that's our outlook on those guys.

Kid Captain this week is Ray Walker, seven-year-old from Indianola. At age one he started having brain seizures, or issues with those, and as many as 20 in a day, I was told. So came to the family hospital here, the Stead Family Children's Hospital, and the care team recommended a surgery and ended up being a 12-hour surgery. And moving forward now, he's a seven-year-old and doing very well. It's just unbelievable some of the things that take place. But great story that way. He's five years right now, he's been seizure free. So that's a good thing and enjoys being outside, has some animals on their acreage and likes to read; and sounds like a tremendous young guy.

Last two things I want to list, I want to salute Mark Abbott stepping aside after 26 years. And he had to follow a legend, too. Father Bob -- I don't know how long Father Bob did it, but just a great voice in Kinnick, and Mark's done a great job likewise. I want to wish he and Mary Jo all the best as they pull back out of that room.

And then last, but not least, we'll get to recognize 28 seniors on Saturday. It's a great group of guys. It's always kind of bittersweet, I think, for everybody involved, certainly for the players. It's the last time they're in Kinnick, which is a really special thing for each and every one of those guys. And then the parents are right there with them. The parents ride the roller coaster. Sometimes it's worse, I think, for parents than it is the actual players, the roller coaster of emotions and all the things they go through

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during a career, some of them four years, some of them five years and then even a couple of them are at six. So pretty amazing there.

Some guys are household names to Hawkeye fans, certainly, then you have other guys that jump out. You think about a guy like Zach Twedt, who's probably better known for being a good samaritan a couple years ago, helped that family who was in need on I-35, I think it was. Been a tremendous guy on our team and just a great team member, team leader and also does a great job in the classroom.

Kelby Telander, who was a Kid Captain, and now he's been a really great contributor as a walk-on on our program and special teams player, tremendous young guy.

Think about a guy like Kale Krogh, who really hasn't seen much significant playing time, but he's been an unbelievable guy behind the scenes, working on the scout teams. He's played through injuries and unfortunately had to quit this year mid season due to injuries and medical procedures, that type of thing. So he's finishing out his career, but I don't know if we've had a guy in 20-plus years with a better attitude, better work ethic that care more about the team.

Then a guy like Jeremiah Pittman, who's a little different circumstance, was anticipated to be a starter, and same thing, ran into some medical hardships -- I don't think this year has gone the way he envisioned it, and none of us did probably. But that's part of the game, unfortunately. Another tremendous young guy, excellent finance student, and my prediction is he'll probably be running a company here in the next 10 years. Just an outstanding young guy as well.

So every guy on the team really has stories, and certainly the seniors have longer ones because they've been here for a long time.

Like I said, it's always a little bit of a bittersweet thing. Got tremendous respect for each and every one of them to run entire race. All of them have a higher standard in terms of citizenship, academics and then the football part of it. It's a lot on everybody's plate, and to be a BIG TEN student-athlete is really a challenge, and to do it in football, I know a little bit more about that, unbelievable challenge.

Nothing but top respect for all these guys, and just really be great for the fans in Kinnick to have a chance to salute them, honor them, and certainly it's not the end of their careers here, but very special day, and will be a challenge for them afterwards to kind of get back on the ground and get focused on our game. That's always the tough part of

it.

So that's the challenge in front of us right now. Again, we're ready for another tough, competitive Big Ten football game.

Q. Looking at the passing offense from last season to this season numbers, completion percentage, yards per games, pretty much on par between last season and this season. Can you pinpoint maybe why there hasn't been that sizeable growth into this season?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we're a little different team, just the way we're made up and the way we do things right now. And obviously a lot of that is contingent on the quarterback and what he does best. And the way things have panned out, we're running Mark probably a little bit more than maybe we would have anticipated going into this whole thing. But that's kind of how things have developed. And certainly not perfect. We've missed some throws along the way, had some protection breakdowns at times, but I think overall the guys have done a good job. I think each season unfolds in a certain way, and you learn about your players and try to do what they do best, and that's just kind of how it's materialized.

Q. I wanted to ask you the three offensive linemen that got hurt, looked like Beau had a helmet-to-helmet maybe. The other two guys, it was kind of hard to tell, maybe a lower body. Is that a fair characterization of those?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah.

Q. What can you say about the severity of those injuries? You said they're not 100 percent chance, but is it like five percent chance that they'll play?

KIRK FERENTZ: First thing I would say is it doesn't help the cause Saturday, obviously. It's one of our strengths right now. And, I'm not real good on percentages, but I think it's realistic to think all three of them have a good chance to play. We're being very careful with what we do daily right now, and probably know more certainly Thursday or Friday. But right now, I'm optimistic, but cautiously optimistic, I guess. I don't know what percent that is. So like probable, non-probable, you know, whatever.

Q. If only one is down, would be Leighton be the guy?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yep.

Q. How do you feel about him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Good. He's done a great job. I can't remember. It was a couple weeks ago where he jumped in there and I thought really did a good job. And, again, we get to watch these guys in practice. You guys don't get that exposure for guys that aren't playing as starters. So he's really just grown with every phase, and yeah, we got great confidence. I thought he did a nice job, again, Saturday. And if he's the guy in there, he'll do fine.

Q. I wanted to ask about T.J. Hall. He was in a sling. That would seem more severe of an injury. What would you say about his possibility this weekend?

KIRK FERENTZ: He has an injury, but just about the sling and the boots, like those things -- everybody gets a sling or a boot if you have any kind of injury. I'm not being facetious or not judgmental at all. But that's kind of like standard protocol. So it really doesn't indicate the severity, good or bad.

But, he's working through it, too. We'll see how it goes. I'm not overly optimistic, I guess, out of all the guys that got injured, but we'll see. And if he doesn't go, Deshaun will jump in there and do a great job.

All these injuries, feel good about the guys going in, but you start getting stretched thin a little bit. We're not unique. Every team in the country is going through this this time of year. But Deshaun will do a great job, as will Zach, and next man up, Jaylen or Rashad Godfrey, whoever it might be.

Q. I wanted to ask about the senior class a little bit more. They had a rather unique start to their college journey being in that weird COVID start. A lot of them didn't get a full senior season in high school, very different first year for college. For them to be able to overcome that to start a college career and then continue to grow into some of the leadership roles you were mentioning earlier, how have you seen this class develop through a rough beginning and then to where they are now?

KIRK FERENTZ: I could talk for a half hour on that topic, because we all lived it. I think all of our worlds got rocked that year. But as a coach in college athletics or I guess coach in any level for that matter, but especially in college, I think it was really impactful, just because of the things that you cited. A lot of those guys, some played in the spring of their senior years; some played in the fall. Some didn't play at all. And depending on where they were geographically, you saw kids move to a different state sometimes so they could play. Just all kinds of crazy stuff that you would never expect to happen.

And then, yeah, you hit the nail on the head. I remember they got here in June back then, or they for the most part came in June, and basically they were sequestered to the dormitory. They were allowed to live in the dorm, come over here and they could train, but small numbers. And then they had to go back to the dorm. I think downtown was totally shut down.

What a way to start your college career. In some ways maybe it was a benefit because they all had to kind of draw together. It was basically them and nobody else. There was nobody else around here.

But all that being said, just a weird time for our country and certainly a weird time to be an incoming team member. And I guess they're a little bit more fortunate than the average student because at least they had a support network here in this building.

But all that being said, it was really a strange thing. I was extremely worried at that point about like what's it going to do to these guys short term and then long term. Long term they've been great, and maybe that's why these guys have been so close. Maybe it was rooted in that. But we also had some fatalities, if you recall. That's a strong word, but some losses along the way, just because I think of the weirdness of this whole time period, you know, where guys just decided not to play or what have you. So it was one for the books, and hopefully none of us go through it again.

Q. I wanted to ask about the two players that played mike linebacker on Saturday, having Jaden Harrell what appeared at least for a good chunk of the game was first and second, and then Jayden on third and when they went for it on fourth. What was the thought process between playing both of those guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a little bit like if we have four DBs, do you take Deshaun out, you know what I mean, who do you take out. I think the biggest point I would make is, like, we consider all five of those DBs starters, and same thing with the linebackers.

I was going to say Jayden, but didn't know as much about Montgomery game wise until he had to jump in there. I believe that was Wisconsin. So he's done nothing but gain everybody's confidence. I think we all feel great about what he does and the contributions he makes. He's a good player, great leader.

And so it's probably a way to get both guys involved, I guess that's the best way to describe it, give them both a piece, some ownership and try to reward the fact that both of them are really doing a great job.

Q. I wanted to ask you more about some of the guys that you've kind of acquired over the years that are seniors now. Like the one-year guys, you're kind of betting on something there that they'll fit in and assimilate to the way you guys do things. With Mark, Jonah, we talked to those guys today, about what's that process like to find those guys and make sure that they're good fits for you guys and how they've worked out for you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah. I'm smiling, I'm not laughing, but I'm thinking ahead already about what's going to come up here because of the new calendar, and it's going to be more blind dating this year than ever, which is really scary. To your point, vetting and just having a good feel, is this going to be a good place for that player; is this player going to be -- fit with what we do. It has to be a mutually beneficial arrangement hopefully. But it is speed dating almost in some ways, social media dating, not that I've ever participated in that, but I've heard about it. It does work at times.

So it's interesting, to say the least. A little bit of it's a crap shoot. And then the other, your thoughts, I thought about this earlier when I'm talking about the guys, four years, five years, six years, a guy like Jacob Gill has only been here two years, yet it feels like he's been here five. He has been an unbelievable fit here. He's all that's good in a football player, person, outstanding student. Just shows up every day, works hard.

He's not the biggest guy, but he's taken a beating over the last two years. I say that, weekly, he's sore on Sundays typically and Mondays and Tuesdays, but the guy shows up and works with a great attitude. He's the kind of guy you love to have in your program for four years or five years, and we got him for two. So I'm appreciative of that.

But it is a crap shoot. The biggest thing is you hope it fits for the player, like he gets here and he's really comfortable in the program, because if guys are comfortable, then they have a chance to use what they have and prosper and hopefully have a great experience. That's the whole objective is for everybody to walk out of here feeling good about what they've done during their time here. That's what you're hoping for.

Q. I wanted to ask about D.J. Vonnahme becoming more or less a critical part of the offense. Forgive my ignorance. Have you had a kid who's come in as a walk-on, get on scholarship and become this important this quickly, one? And, two, did you think you'd struck gold when you got him as a walk-on?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll start with that one. Yeah, we felt like

maybe he had a chance. We really did. He had come to camp. He's an athlete playing quarterback, which if I was a high school coach, he'd either be playing quarterback or running back, one of the two, the best guy on your team. So that's usually a good tip.

He impressed us in camp, just a snapshot. I mean that's all you get. Since he's been here, everything about him is easy to like. He's a really good learner, probably above -- well above his -- for what you'd expect out of a guy that young.

Then I think the biggest thing, I've said this before, there's no question he's a good athlete. You never know about how he's going to respond in game conditions. I guess you can't predict that necessarily. And everything we've seen so far has been very positive.

The other thing I'm really surprised about is you have to project a guy trying to block. We've done that with Hockenson. We did it with Ike Boettger. He was a quarterback when we first started getting to know him a little bit. And D.J. has a real rare ability to get in the right position, and then he has the right temperament, where he's trying to finish. That's not always true with all tight ends. So he has a really good mix of things, and the best thing is he has a lot of time in front of him, and his attitude is just unbelievable.

So, yeah, nobody would have predicted him being this far at this point, but it's been pretty good, and I don't see it changing, just because of the way he works and the way he approaches the game.

Q. Kirk, when you've had so many close losses and maybe the playoff is out of reach, the Big Ten, sometimes guys can maybe coast at the end of the year, all this sitting out stuff. What gives you confidence that these senior leaders will keep this team rolling into the final two games and then a bowl game?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, we try to encourage a couple of things during the course of the season certainly, and one is just let's worry about this week this week and tell the guys we'll do all the math afterwards. We have plenty of people helping us on that anyway.

But at the end of the year we'll figure out where we're at on all that stuff. But the biggest thing is just about getting ready each week and competing, as cliché and mundane as that is. But that's easier said than done.

And these guys have done it 10 weeks. They've competed as hard as you can out there. And that's all you can ask,

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and to me it would be such a waste of 10 good weeks to take our foot off the gas at this point. That's really, to me, what it all gets down to.

And you're playing because every week is a challenge in itself, and you're trying to go out and do the best you possibly can regardless of who's there Saturday. And that's really what the game is about.

So just being around our team, you can never predict anything. Like you never know 100 percent what's going to happen, but after 10 weeks, I'm confident these guys are going to do it again. They're going to show up and line up and compete again Saturday, knowing that we have a team that's going to do the same thing we're playing.

First of all, just to survive in the BIG TEN, you better be doing that. But, more importantly, it's about what we're trying to -- how do we want to feel about this team when the season is over.

Q. I think Xavier Nwankpa said after the game he tweaked his hamstring. Is he doing okay?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah. He seems fine. Yeah. A little strain, but he seems fine.

Q. If T.J. can't go, would Zach move more permanently to corner -- I mean how would that kind of move the pieces a little bit in terms if he goes to corner, someone else in cash or going with Jaylen at corner? Do you have an idea of how that might go?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's just a matter of where the pieces fit, but to that point, you know, obviously Deshaun and Zach will be your corners, and then you figure it out. Somebody's going to go to cash, whether it's Jalen, Rashad. But it will be out of that group of guys. We'll mix them around, yep.

Q. I realize the wins and losses completely matter and all that. But the way the guys talk, I mean they all believe and I think a lot of people in this room probably believe that this is one of the better teams you've probably had in terms of just quality. Do you feel that way? I know the race isn't finished yet, but do you feel like this is one of the better teams that you've had despite the win-loss record, I guess, at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the objective is not to be close, but the objective is to really compete hard and play our best. And every game you can find things that, hey, we could have done this a little better or that a little better. But to me the biggest thing of 20 some years it's about the effort you put in, the commitment you make and how you

compete.

So these guys have been checking that box. And, again, it's a lot, I think, easier said than done. And all you have to do is look at the scores every weekend, how that happened or how did this game be that close, that type of deal.

So it's a hell of a challenge. And, yeah, as a coach, like that's really what I feel good about or don't feel good about at the end of the year is like just what was the level of commitment and how do our guys respond to the various situations.

And it's tough after you get beat. We've had heartbreaking losses against really good teams. So, you know, it is hard, and you gotta give these guys a lot of credit for the way they come back, go to work on Monday. And that to me is what the game is about. That's really what you learn from it and what you take away.

So, you know, we'd rather be 10 and 0 right now. We're not. And we can't do anything about it. So the thing we have to do is worry about the next two, and right now that second one is a mile away.

Like we have to worry about this week first, and like I said, all that other stuff gets figured out.

I think there are 12 teams in the playoffs now. We keep changing it, right, or we do change it. But I know this math, outside of 12 teams, everybody else is going to be mad, they're going to be upset or whatever. Obviously you'd rather be in that 12, but if you're not, there's still a lot of good teams and a lot of good stories that aren't in that top 12.

I'll go back to 2001, like, I don't know if I enjoyed a win more than the Alamo Bowl, to go 7-5. Every season, every game has its own significance, and you can't get sucked into the, you know, they said or they think all that stuff. To me you can't, unless you just want to go crazy, drive yourself crazy, and that's not good to do to yourself or let other people do that.

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