

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Just looking backwards real quickly, obviously happy to get win. It was hard-fought the other day, and I expected that, as I said, from Michigan State. They've really been playing well the last couple of games. It's three in a row now they've really competed. It was a tough win for us, but a good win.

Thought our guys really practiced and prepared well a week ago and certainly competed and, fortunately, came up with the things we needed at the end of the game, especially in that fourth quarter.

Kudos to our special teams and Kaden Wetjen, did a great job. As a result of that, his efforts were rewarded with the Big Ten Special Teams Player of the Week and well deserved. Also, he is a finalist for the Jet Award. Happy for him. He's having a great year and having a lot of fun playing out there.

Congratulations to Aaron Graves, too, for the finalist in the Pop Warner Award, which I think is really fitting for Aaron. Then Logan Jones, the announcement that he is a finalist for the Outland. That's quite a credit to him, too. He's had a great career and is playing really outstanding football for us right now.

All that being said, moving into this week, captains are the same four guys: Hurkett, Entringer, Gronowski, and Logan Jones.

Injury front, both TJ Hall and then Hayden Large were able to work a little bit today and yesterday, but I'm not sure if they'll make it or not. We'll have to wait and see how the week pans out, but they've both made a lot of progress. Probably more so than we've anticipated. We'll see. I don't know. We still have a couple more days for them to recover, and hopefully they'll be able to contribute a little bit, but we'll see how that goes.

Our opponent Nebraska is having a good season, they are 7-4. Third year under Coach Rhule, and everywhere he's been, that's kind of been the track record. He's gone in and taken over some places where they haven't had a lot

of success and has methodically built them. That's what we're seeing right now.

It's kind of interesting. The offense coordinator, they made a switch last year during the season. Certainly have settled in, but then they had a quarterback injury this year, so they've had to adjust a little bit and doing an outstanding job.

The quarterback is playing well. Running back is leading the Big Ten in rushing and is also active in the passing game as well. So they're doing a really good job in that regard.

Good receiving corps. Those guys block well too in terms of not only receiving the ball, but they're excellent blockers. Out on the perimeter that's a big part of what they do. That's a big challenge for us.

Defensively, they have a new coordinator, and it's a different scheme. First of all, very multiple. A lot of looks. A lot of pressures. A lot of different movements. It's one of those games where our guys are really going to have to be wired in, and not sure what to expect, quite frankly, but a lot to get ready for in that regard.

I think probably the area they're most improved in is special teams. They've made a switch there, too. They have a new coordinator, and he clearly has had an impact. It's two-fold in my mind. Overall, they're playing with a real attitude like they're embracing the fact that special teams are important, and they're really working that. It shows up in all their areas basically.

Then their specialists have done a really good job. Both the punter, who is a freshman, a guy who punts it left-footed or right-footed and can roll all that stuff. Does a lot of different things.

The field goal kicker has been very consistent, and then the thing that really jumps out is the return game. We've had some luck in that, and they have two different people doing it, but their punt returner is a really dangerous player, and the kickoff return unit does a great, great job, too.

Basically every matchup is going to be really critical, because they do a really nice job with all those things. Then on top of it, we're going into a tough environment.

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They have a very loyal fan base, and always a tough environment to walk into. So that's all part of the package right now.

A couple of words about the Kid Captain. We have Millie Judge from Des Moines, who is a 10-year-old and had open heart surgery four months into her life. Basically had a condition that was a little bit a rare genetic deal. Also, they've developed a rare genetic illness since her open heart surgery. That was for murmurs, and then has a symptom or disease now that causes multiple tumors to show up.

So she's dealt with that, had multiple surgeries where they've taken the tumors out and different polyps. All that being said, she's doing really well. Has a great attitude, and I'm told her one of her favorite pastimes is to put a white coat on and be the doctor to her little sister and also some of her dolls, that type of thing. We'll be honored to respect her this weekend.

Then the Hero Game is a great concept, which started years ago, honoring two people from each state, respective states. We have 12-year-old Jayce Koob, who lives out in rural Sioux County. Basically woke up in the middle of the night during a fire, and unfortunately three teenagers were killed in the fire. Jayce had the awareness to get on a four-wheeler and go to the neighbor's house and get help and was able to save the life of one of the teenagers that was in the house.

Obviously a very tragic incident, but he's a true hero for his actions certainly and saved a life. It will be great to have him being honored on Saturday representing our state. Again, I think it's a really nice, nice gesture to recognize really worthy people from each state.

The last thing, wrapping it up, it's a short week. Short week for both teams. Both teams have played 11 games, so it's the end of the season. Everybody is tired right now. Everybody is a little bit sore. It's part of the territory. We've played in a lot of these now, and I think we've made the adjustments we feel pretty comfortable with, and the bottom line is trying to be ready at kickoff, and that's what both teams are doing right now. It's kind of a race against time.

Again, we know it's going to be a big challenge. Look at the last five games. They've all been one-score games, and basically over five years it's a five-point differential per game, so I think that gives you just an indication of the way this series has been.

Q. I think this is, without question, a rivalry that's really amplified over the past ten years, probably

becoming one of the more known Big Ten rivalries. I guess from a coach's perspective, how do you kind of balance motivating your team to utilize maybe that disdain or dislike? You can respect them, but you can dislike them. How do you balance using that disdain as motivation but also making sure they're not trying too hard, making bone-head plays? From your perspective, what's the proper amount of motivation? How do you balance that out?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't speak for our players, but I think it's probably more fans than players. I'm old enough to remember when I got here in the '80s. The western side of our state was basically Nebraska territory.

It's two-fold. They really had it rolling back then, Bob Devaney and Tom Osborne. Then the flip side of it is we didn't have it rolling. That's back when printed newspapers were really big. I think whatever the Nebraska paper might have been that was prominent in western Iowa, 712 area code, that type of deal. So if you were up in Sioux City, you're in enemy territory basically.

Coach Fry was able to balance that out a little bit, both success on the field, but also he worked really hard in-state recruiting. Even going around now, people out in western Iowa, they are either in one camp or the other. Fortunately, we have more in our camp than we used to.

Yeah, it's part of what I think makes conference football pretty cool. We weren't in the conference for so many years. Now that we have been, I think it's probably been more engrained now now that we're past that 2010, 2012 time period and what have you.

Week to week there are so many games here that are all tough, and this one is going to be another tough one. That's really where we try to keep our focus.

Q. You mentioned a couple of seniors that have all earned some recognition in the last 24 hours: Kaden, Aaron, Logan. I wanted to ask about Max Llewellyn. Not one of those that received an award. Kind of a quieter guy, but how have you seen him take a little bit of a leadership role this year and heading into his final regular season game on Friday?

KIRK FERENTZ: As you know, it's tougher for linemen. Logan is an exception. He's been here six years. It's tougher for linemen to get some of that note than maybe some other guys do.

You score touchdowns, returning punts, everybody notices, it's pretty obvious. But one thing you were talking about and I'm sitting here thinking about the stories. Aaron came

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in here and played at a pretty young age, Aaron Graves. You look at Wetjen's path to the level he's playing at right now, which is a really high level. I don't know if anybody could have predicted that four years ago or three years ago, but it's just been that incremental gain.

I transition over to Max, and that's been his story. What impressed us in recruiting was his motor, his energy playing. He wasn't big enough obviously. He was really skinny and slender coming out of high school, but that's one thing that hasn't changed, and now obviously he's developed physically, and he's a lot more mature and stronger and all that stuff.

His motor, his attitude, his effort have been spectacular from day one. Then the other part -- and this is a little bit like Kaden Wetjen, too -- he was always going hard, but he didn't always go the right way. In fact, it was 50/50 probably three years ago, but now that experience has paid off. He's such a valuable leader.

Coincidentally, I was walking off the field with Reece Morgan this morning talking about -- both he and Hurkett, and those are two guys we're going to miss a lot. They're experienced guys. They've been out there competing. It's a quieter way with a guy like that, but they add so much to our football team just by their effort and their play after play after play. Whether it's practice or games, they don't change. They're so consistent.

Q. Logan talked about how he was not himself in the game the other day. He's recovered a little bit here, but I guess how much are those four guys playing through right now, especially on a short week, and how confident are you that they can be the line that they've been most of the year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Ironically, there's actually good news there, but to your point, it's a factor. I don't think we are quite as sharp Saturday as we've been, and I think it showed up on the tape.

Nobody's fault, but the damage was done during the week when guys can't work. I was talking to Reese about that this morning also. Coincidentally, my experience is, and the NFL is not much different. Maybe if with a guy that's played ten years in the NFL, he can miss a week of practice and play pretty much at a high level, but you can't do that week after week. It catches up to you.

My experience is for most players if they miss multiple days of practice, it really impacts their performance. It's not dramatic, but it's just those little details that matter. So I think that hurt us a little bit last week, no question. They weren't 100% Saturday, but more so to the time they

missed during the course of the week, and it happens sometimes. Players, you got to do what you got to do to get a guy out there. You have to be smart about how you handle it during the week.

The good news is, like all those guys on Monday felt better than they did a week ago Monday or even Saturday. Their arrows are going up, and that's positive. I'm hoping if we're smart about it this week, those guys will be ready to go on Friday. I think they should be good to go, yeah.

Q. I wanted to ask about Omar and his first year and how he's operated in terms of rotating the running backs. How it's been different from a guy like Ladell, and obviously you had Kaleb last year, but how has it been different? What do you think about how he's operated when doing that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really good. Ladell and Omar are totally different people and personalities, and that's what makes life beautiful.

You can say it about a lot of things, but the commonality is I think they're both excellent coaches and excellent people, and probably the people part is the most important. I think that's where good coaching starts.

Omar is really knowledgeable, as was Ladell. They just have different personalities, but really pleased with the way everything is going with everybody involved. That's namely the coach and the players. Those two have to really mesh and combine.

Then the bigger picture there is that last year was easy, because Kaleb just emerged. It was kind of like when Shonn Greene was here. It wouldn't have mattered who else is going to get work. We'll figure that out. Whoever needs to get the work will get the work, but we're going to keep Shonn out there or Kaleb out there as much as possible.

This year it's a little bit more by committee, to your point. We've had years like that. So that's part about learning about your team as the season goes on and then doing what's best for everybody to make it work. The idea is to move the ball and try to complement what we're trying to do offensively.

I'm pleased with everything, especially the second part of the season. Ironically, we're a healthier team this year the latter part of the year, the second half than the first half. That was the joke that we didn't want to start anybody the running back, because for a couple of weeks there, whoever we started got hurt that game. It was like the kiss of death. Yeah, I think we're past that, hopefully.

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Q. You guys have won 9 of 10, but a lot of those wins, seven points or less, three points, five. Why have you been able to pull those close games out in this type of rivalry series?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know if I can put my finger on it. It just happens. The bigger point is the closeness. It seems like every year this game is just back and forth and tough.

There's one got that got away that one year. I guess one here and one there, but for the most part and we've had some crazy turns too, as you know. Two years ago I guess that would have been maybe as wild of an ending or just an unusual of an ending. You know, somehow some way if you can get there and get it done, that's the goal.

Who knows what's going to happen this week on Friday, but my guess is based on what we've seen the last ten years, it's going to be another back and forth and right down until the end deal.

Q. Logan Jones said something that piqued my interest. He said he was hoping for maybe a scholarship offer from Nebraska. He committed to you guys, and he's so grateful for that. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think you might have said that you moved him from defensive tackle to center too late in the process, and it kind of stunted the growth a little bit. Anyway, now that we're six years in and you have the biggest picture, how glad are you that, A, he chose you guys, and how has he big picture been able to adjust to that change and grow into the lineman he is now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't know if it stunted it too much, but it did a little bit. Linderbaum moved over in December. He picked up an extra dozen practices probably that Logan didn't have the advantage of. I think what you see is, like Tyler, when he started that next fall, he was a little bit more proficient maybe than Logan. I didn't know Logan was going to play six years, so it ended up not being that big of a deal in the big scheme of things, but Logan picked things up pretty quickly, too.

You've heard me say this before, too. There's one thing about your work in practice and you go against good players, but game situations are just different. The more experience you can get of game experience, the better off you are going to be if you are thinking right and doing things right.

Both those guys are at the head of the class in terms of their reliability, the way they study the game, work at it, take care of themselves. Tyler was back here this past summer and got to spend some time with him, and you

watch him train. He's the same guy when he trains. He hasn't changed a lick, except he's smarter and more experienced now, but he just has a way of doing things, and Logan is very similar to that. They're a little bit different personalities, yet very similar in terms of their focus and their seriousness.

To me it's not coincidental or accidental that they've developed into really good football players, and Tyler is having a great career with Baltimore. I have predicted the same for Logan. He'll doing really well wherever he goes. He won't change. He'll be the same guy five years from now.

Q. I know I hate asking such a broad question, but looking at the senior class, Xavier Nwankpa, the five star, stays home. Logan switching from defensive tackle, center, doing what he has done. Ethan Hurkett, overcoming adversity after his early injury in his career. TJ Hall's emergence as a senior. It seems like this is one of more unique senior classes from every walk of life and the way their stories unfolded. I guess what can you say about this senior class? How do you kind of quantify all these different stories, but still meshing together to make just, again, a unique kind of path for you guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: Two of our three program goals are graduation and then maximizing your career. You can't do either one of those if you don't stay the course.

I have guys leave the program or whatever, you know, two years into it or three years into it, one year into it. It's hard to graduate from Iowa if you leave, and it's hard to maximize your career here. All those guys you mentioned are going to hit both those marks.

They have graduated or are going to graduate, and then the other part of it is they've really maxed out their careers. Most of the guys you mentioned -- all the guys. Let me rephrase that. All the guys you mentioned are playing their best football right now, which is paramount. If you are going to have a good team, you have to have guys playing their best when they're older.

The other thing is they've improved, some night and day, night and day. You mentioned TJ. A year ago he was a solid corner in the Big Ten. Right now he's playing at a really high level, and we saw that starting to really take place in the spring.

I think Xavier is playing with more confidence and more decisiveness than he ever has, and he's played well and played a lot of football. That's just part of if guys are thinking right, working right, then that all kind of falls in



place for them. Again, you can't do it if you don't stay.

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It's easier said than done. It's hard to be a college football senior. I really believe that.

Q. This is going to be the third time in Big Ten play that you have gone up against a backup quarterback with TJ Lateef this week. How do you go about preparing for a backup quarterback? Are you looking at the full season of film or predominantly trying to look at the last couple of weeks? What is your guy's philosophy for preparing for a backup quarterback.

KIRK FERENTZ: We have a lot of good video on Lateef, and he's done a really nice job. He's out there playing well.

They've changed a little bit offensively, but not dramatically. You still have to prepare.

He's a really good football player. The other guy was just an unusual passer, very gifted, very talented passer. Aren't many guys in the country that can throw the ball like he did, but they've made that adjustment and shifted pretty fluidly, and it's not affected them at all.

The good news is, again, we have film of him and film of them playing with him. Now the challenge is to try to stop what they're doing with him.

Q. A couple of guys that played career high snap counts the other day. DJ Vonnahme and Jaylen Watson, what did you learn about them on Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we just talked about the seniors, and now you go to the other end of the spectrum, guys coming up the ladder. We talked about DJ a little bit before, but he's been a guy we've been watching and are really encouraged by.

Going back to earlier in the season when he played in games, he really seems to handle it pretty well. Always curious when guys at the front of their careers get in game activity, you know, what what's it going to look like? He seems like it's no big deal. He just does a good job. He'll certainly keep getting better. Happy with that.

Then Jaylen same thing. He's been a guy that I think Phil identified probably a year ago as a guy that's starting to get traction and jumped in there and really competed well Saturday and most extensive action he's had.

He's in the Army now. Here we go. He's enlisted.

Hope you all get to enjoy Thanksgiving, be it Thursday or Saturday or whenever, but hope you get one. Thank you.

