

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon, everybody. It's been a while. Haven't seen you for a while.

First, I want to congratulate Coach McCollum and everybody involved in the men's basketball program. What a year they had, and all the winter teams had great years. But the run they made in the tournament was fun to watch.

I know everybody that follows the Hawkeyes enjoyed watching that. We certainly did, everybody in our program. A great effort, great performance by all those guys.

Bringing you up to date on a couple of things. A lot of this stuff is old news for you but to cover it real quickly. Jay Norvell was back here for a home game in November, Michigan State, and served as our honorary captain. Little did I know at that point, he was out just kind of going watching practices and what have you. After the bowl game, he reached out and said if anything would open up here, he'd have an interest.

We had an empty chair, if you will, due to some transitions. So he decided to join us in January as an analyst. He was going to be one of the guys helping us out with the game plan, that type of thing. Then with Omar leaving, it made it a natural transition.

Back in November, I never would have guessed this was going to happen. But it's great to have Jay join our staff. When he spoke to our team back in November, it was really impressive. And it was fun for me to tell his story a little bit being a guy that really didn't have a home for quite a while during his time in the program, and then finally got some traction at the strong safety position his senior year. Ends up being an All-Big Ten player, leads the league in interceptions and captain of a Rose Bowl team.

So his career as a football player really illustrates what the game's all about. And obviously he's done a great job in his coaching career, too. He's been a great addition to our program. Really happy with that.

Right along with that, with the seat that just opened with

Jay's transition, happy to have Mike Grant join our program. Mike is a guy I've gotten to know a couple years. Guy that played over at Nebraska in the early '90s. Just a first-class guy and the last couple coaching stops, Illinois State and Wyoming, very successful programs. Mike is going to help us out being an analyst.

The other thing offensively to mention, Billy VandeMerkt is going to be our quarterback coach. He'll transition into that role. He'll still do some analyst work but he'll be coaching the quarterbacks and Tim will be overseeing the entire offense. That kind of settles things there.

And yesterday's news to a degree, but Chris Polizzi taking over LeVar's special teams role. I think most everybody is aware of that. And Chris, it was interesting with him. He was a GA here years ago. Left here, much like Seth Wallace's path, left here and went out and cut his teeth with his own jobs, most recently at Tulsa.

When that staff got let go a year ago, he came back and served as an analyst a year ago. So now he's going to slide into that role much like LeVar's transition.

And happy that Brock Sherman, who has been with us now seven years, is staying.

Stetson McClravy is a good young guy, really done a good job. He'll be staying as well.

And then Kevin Spencer, who I worked with 100 years ago, Kevin came in when LeVar took over and served as a really good resource. It's great to do that. So he's back with us. So we've got quite a team there in the special teams department. The guys are doing a good job.

And I think as all of you know, day one, going back to when I got hired here, December of '98, first thing we want to do is do good on special teams, just try to build a foundation there. And strength and conditioning were the two things we wanted to get established right off the bat.

Things haven't changed. Our approach and our attitude won't change there. And those guys will do a great job coaching. I know that. So confident there.

Transitioning now of football. Certainly, 2026, a very new year. I caught myself coming back on the plane ride back

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from Tampa on the 1st thinking a little bit about the difference in basically everything from a year ago.

We graduated 27 seniors, not all of them were starters, but all of them were really good contributors to the program. Really embodied the things that you look for in a good college football player, a Hawkeye football player. And did a great job academically, did a great job work ethic and being team members.

And several of those guys played at a high level, too. But just in mass, that's quite a group as big as we've had. And the contributions from all of them are really appreciated. So that was an obvious change.

And then what I didn't foresee coming, we had 27 new guys join the team, actually at the start of the semester. That's a first.

It's kind of a reflection, I think, the way college football is going right now. It's a different world than it was. And I'm old enough to remember when scholarships got offered after a senior year, December, January, and then guys showed up in August. Those days are long gone. That was the '80s. It's transitioned a little faster 25 years ago, and now very, very different.

So most recently June was kind of the normal starting point for the most part. And I think we're going to see a shift here to these January beginnings for high school players coming out.

And then the portal and all that stuff is a whole different discussion.

The interesting thing is right now, back in January, we had 90-plus percent of our roster here on campus. That's the first time I can remember a number that big.

All that being said, I think the take away for us is we wanted to start at the start, didn't assume anything. A lot of newcomers. So just the things that we try to cover in the summertime historically, the old days, it was August, just orientational stuff and trying to get them to know the program, understand the program.

That began back in January. And the guys have been great. Both the mix of 14 transfers and 13 first-year guys out of high school. They've all been great. They have had a good attitude. Certainly I mentioned special teams being important. Special teams always will be, always have been. Strength conditioning is where everything starts in football in my mind. That got off to a great start.

The winter program ran eight weeks and the guys did a

great job. Coach Braithwaite and his staff really do good work there.

All that being said, I think what we've seen is a good attitude, a lot of new guys learning fast, good attitude, eager. Now we transition into the spring ball portion of things.

Got back here off break. Pro Day last Monday. And then two days in shells and put pads on on Saturday, our first day of contact. Had a coaches clinic going on, all that type of thing. Here on in we kind of settle into a routine of three practices a week and good meeting time.

Really good opportunity for everybody to learn how to play football and learn what to do, that type of deal.

So every phase is important. This one is certainly going to be important for all of us, and just to learn. All of us are learning right now. We as coaches are learning more about our team. It's a totally new team. Obviously the new guys are learning a lot. But even the guys that are back, whether they played or not, certainly are working to move forward as well.

It's pretty simple what a player's job is. They have to learn what to do, how to do it. Those aren't easy, but then the hard part is being able to do it and being able to do it with consistency. That's the challenge right now.

It's good to get that part started. Last thing I'll say, we always cover certain points before spring ball, before camp. And one of them is the depth-chart topic or the depth chart. And it certainly pertains to this team. Like, what it looks like right now really is not important because so many things are going to happen between now and the start of the season.

Still five months before we kick off and then you got another three-plus once the season begins.

The one thing I do would predict is you're going to see a lot of things changing and a lot of things may look a little different here in a couple months, that type of thing. And that's kind of the beauty of the whole thing. And the bottom line is nobody really knows what it's going to look like or how it's going to go.

But what you can evaluate is the effort being put into it, the way the guys are going about their work. So far so good there.

Pleased with the leadership. We lost a lot of really good leaders and see leadership emerging, so that's certainly a positive thing.

And biggest thing is just it's a race against time right now to see how good we can become and then at some point be coherent. But right now it's just a matter of trying to learn the skills, learn what to do those types of things. So it's really where our focus is right now.

Q. Whenever we've asked you about Jeremy Hecklinski, you've thrown out the Drew Tate comparison a few times. A lot of guys that we talked to today said gunslinger, he's a guy who likes to push the ball downfield. How much of it for him is it going to be just sort of to know when to take those shots downfield and when to risk it, and then when to just say take what's given to you; you're going to have shots later on in the game or practice? Is that something that you have to continue to work through? And what have you kind of seen from him in the early going?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there's no position more challenging, probably, than playing quarterback, mainly because they have their hands on the ball every play. So a lot of responsibility with that.

I'm always reluctant or hesitant sometimes to throw out the terms of comparing a guy to a former player. But there are some parallels, personality-wise there, and just the way he plays the game. And then also the gunslinger term can connote recklessness or whatever. And I'm not trying to suggest that.

But he's not afraid to throw it and throw it in there. And part of that, though, is knowing when and how. And as things change, game circumstances, all that kind of stuff, transition to another guy.

C.J. Beathard had a good feel for that. He'd try to throw it in some tight windows, but he knew when to do it. And when he did it, he usually was confident he could do it. I think part of that's learned a little bit. Not that I'm a quarterback expert, but I think part of that's learned and there's a time to do it.

That all being said, yeah, Jeremy's got a good attitude. And he and Hank are different players in terms of statistically but also personality-wise. I think if you learn one thing in football -- whether it's pro, college, it doesn't matter -- there's no set way to do things. It's about playing within yourself, who you are, and maximizing what it is that you bring to the game and both those guys are working really hard at it.

Q. I wanted to ask about Zach Lutmer. He was talking earlier today about how his leadership skills are being

refined throughout spring ball. What are some of your expectations for some of these, particularly when it comes to the linebackers and defensive backs who are returning, what are your expectations in their leadership development, especially with some of the younger guys like Lutmer or players like that?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's a great example. Some guys have to grow up a little faster than maybe they would in the normal world. But that's part of tying in with the college football world that we're living in too, guys. Things are happening faster.

And Zach's a really good illustration because Zach was a fairly quiet guy and probably is by nature certainly when he first got here. Did a really nice job but it was pretty quietly done. And I think he's got a real good awareness that you know I think everybody does right now. They understand that we lost a lot of guys who were really good contributors and did a good job helping lead.

It all starts with taking care of your business, first and foremost, but then hopefully you can bring some other guys with you and help out that way. We haven't had a conversation about it. But I think he senses that just watching him, I think he and several other guys know that they've got to do that if we're going to have a good football team. They have to be proactive with their leadership.

That's great. And that's part of the maturation process, quite frankly. But he's a really good football player. I think we all know that. But he's developed into a strong leader, too, and that's great to see.

Q. You obviously lose a lot with your offensive line, three guys moving on probably to the NFL. What have you seen from some of those new guys stepping in there in that unit as a whole in their first few practices? And is there anybody that kind of stands out to you so far?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, not yet. We've only had pads on twice. I'll say this, it's really hard to practice against each other, period. And it's almost impossible when we don't have pads on. Nobody wants to give an inch. It's just the nature. I mean the defensive guys are competitive, the offensive guys are competitive.

It really is hard. But it's a little bit easier now. So that helps.

But so far so good. It's early. We are not totally together yet, so wouldn't/shouldn't be totally in sync. But see some guys that certainly look better than they did back in December. That's one of the things about spring practice

and spring ball will have a little better grip and feel for it.

And that's a position where you graduate three really good players. It's anybody's game right now. Anybody can step up and take a role there, and the more the merrier. Like ideally we'd have six, seven guys we can throw into the football game and have confidence they'll play well.

Q. You guys went real heavy with FCS guys in the transfer portal. What was kind of your approach in that regard? Because obviously you've had -- it's been hit or miss sort of with that level coming up here and success stories, et cetera. What gives you confidence that these guys are the right guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know how intentional it was, but it just worked that way. It's kind of like recruiting high school players. You're looking for guys that maybe are going to -- you see some things, characteristics, attributes that they may have that you think you can develop and bring along.

And I know you know this. I think there's only one senior in the group. That was kind of intentional, if at all possible, because we'd rather have guys who are going to be here for at least two, three years to kind of become part of the fabric. We've had one-year guys do a great job of that. But to get them in the program and bring them along, develop them here, that was kind of our goal.

If we got starters, great. But it was more about improving our top 44 players and improving the competition. That is one thing about the transfer portal; you get a guy that's been out of high school for at least a year.

We have a bunch of guys going through that transition right now, trying to figure out everything, A through Z. So at least I got a little bit of a jump. And I think that, maybe just long-term-wise, I think it can help us. But time will tell. We'll see how it all goes. So far, so good.

Q. I wanted to ask you about NIL and how it may impact you in a positive way, meaning that in the past you've lost, I can think of three safeties off the top of my head who left for the NFL that were probably not in their best interest but they wanted to get paid and they left. Now in reverse, you can be competitive financially in those situations and put them on an even playing field, like whether it's Zach or Trevor Lauck, who how a market if he wanted to go, and certainly Kade Pieper did as well. Has that been a positive -- is that something you talk them about, like, say, in December when all these discussions are going on, that we can't pay you like the pros, but we can get you close and get you better?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm only half smiling because it's actually two-fold. You have the NFL, who you can deal with because you know roughly where things are going to fall. Then you have other schools that -- it's one of those deals -- one of the cases is well-publicized.

That has been one of my bigger fears, just when this whole thing got going, was us getting poached, players leaving for financial reasons to other schools.

If they go to the NFL, that's one thing. If that's a good decision, then I'm all for it. I've always supported them. If he's going to be a first-round pick, and maybe you could make an argument for a guy that's going to be a second-round pick going ahead and taking off to the NFL.

But your point's very valid in terms of all that stuff is slated or slotted, I should say, the salaries, round by round. Whether or not the player accepts the information that's been given to him from the NFL people about this is kind of the range, they can do the math on that. And I think it definitely does give them another alternative.

And then like I said, the other thing you have to do is just hopefully the players in your program want to stay here and they're not going to make a decision for five bucks to go somewhere else. What that range of five bucks is depends on the player.

And we just have made a decision we're not going to get into that game. And I just think our overall thought in this whole thing -- we have a lot of things to get addressed and fixed. We all know that. But our idea is to do things fairly internally.

So if a player were to ask somebody else, at least, you know, okay, I can see that. Like, they all think it's fair and reasonable. You know people are always going to argue about \$5.

But the idea is to treat your players fairly and let them achieve as they grow and develop in the program. And that's the approach we've tried to take from the onset of this. But there are a lot of outside interferences. That is a positive, though. Good to have a positive.

Q. Is Jeremy and Hank splitting first-team reps right now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah.

Q. This is Hank's second spring ball with you guys. What type of growth have you seen from him and the impressions early on so far this spring?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really early in the game, because you've got a lot of variables, a lot of things going on -- who is playing receiver, what the protection is, the quality of the protection. There's a million things going on.

But both guys are certainly more comfortable than a year ago. That's the good news. They're both operating, I think, with a lot more confidence, familiarity. And I think that hurt Mark to some degree. Even though he was here last spring, not being able to actually take snaps and operate and practice hurts you.

So that part's all good. And we're just going to let it ride. Yeah, they are splitting reps pretty much down the middle, and we'll probably do that -- I mean there's no rush here, there's no benefit in making a call unless it just becomes obvious. Then we'll do that.

But I really foresee these guys competing for quite a while. The whole idea is not to make a decision fast, but to make the right decision. That's what we're going to try to do.

Q. Wanted to ask you about the 13 freshmen. That's an enormous number for your program to come in. Did you guys put any plans in place to kind of help them transition to this level at this point in their lives?

KIRK FERENTZ: Years ago, we formed the player developmental position, which Chic Ejiasi, basically he just took it and grew it, trial and error. He's still down with the Titans. I actually saw the GM who hired him, Jon Robinson, last week. We were talking about the phone call we had. I just said, if you interview Chic, I promise you're going to consider him.

Didn't know they were going to hire him. And they did. Spot on.

But to that point, Sam Brinks is in that role now. Does a great job with it. And Noah Shannon works with him. So those guys spend a lot of time with the first-year guys, all the first-year guys, but especially the guys coming out of high school.

I tell the recruits this all the time: It's a much better world to be a college athlete than it was in the '80s, with all due respect. But the staffing, the resources that are available to them, they have a lot more going for them, a lot more help with the transition.

All that being said, that stuff's all good unless, but it's not good if you don't make an investment and aren't proactive with it.

We've tried to lay everything out and then same thing as

the program-wise with all the new guys, just assuming they don't know anything the way we do things or how we do things, kind of that old John Wooden. Here's how you put socks on, here's how you lace your shoes. That never made sense to me until I asked Bill Tessenorf, our guy in Baltimore about it, because everybody's putting shoes on.

And he says, Kirk, most guys in the NFL don't tie their shoes well. I'll never forget that. He told me that my first year here. I never thought about it and I never looked at a guy's shoes either. So you know, it's interesting. But point being you can't take anything for granted.

Q. Unique situation, you've got Tim here in his third year, six years as a head coach. Jay's got nine years under his belt. I think Greg Davis maybe had four at Tulane. Ken had a year at Fordham. Not a lot of head coaching experience has been on the assistants. Just what has that been bringing to the table when you've got guys who don't have to worry about all the non-football stuff that head coaches have to do and they can just focus on the game? What have you seen from Jay so far and Tim in a couple of years?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think those guys are all having fun because they're just coaching. They don't have to do all the stuff that you -- my best two hours of the day are going out to the field because there's no phones, all that stuff out there.

I keep joking, that's my retirement job. I'm looking for a good line job somewhere before I get done. I'll keep looking. But anyway, just it's pure coaching. You have your group that you really get to get intimate with and get to coach them on a daily basis. That's really the joy of coaching. It's never changed. So in some ways I am envious of those guys, and I haven't asked any of them, but I think, yeah, I think they probably don't mind not worrying about, like, this and this, and just fully jumping in with the offense and jumping in with their players or defense, whatever the case may be. Yeah, it's just pure coaching. It's a pretty good deal.

Q. Quarterback battles are fascinating to me. Looks like you're not going to break any news today. That's okay. Do you think April or March and April as kind of a starting line for a competition and every day being equally important? Is there perhaps more weight given to days closer to game day like when the heat is on and the pads are on in August? How do you assess that?

KIRK FERENTZ: You never really know. You never know when the picture is going to unfold or if it will unfold. Right now it's about doing the work in the out of season that



comes with preseason work or spring ball work, learning the offense, going through film. Just sitting and watching with a coach that type of thing and learn as much as you can.

There's no position that invests more time with film study than the quarterbacks. You have to if you're going to play a position, certainly in an offense like ours.

It starts there. The idea is to take it out to the field and play better and more fluid, fluidly. I think it's an assessment you want to go over time with.

I don't want to say it's a critical period, but once you get into camp, things are getting a little closer, a little more condensed, we don't do game prep until eight, 10 days out before our first ball game. Somewhere in there you'd probably like to have some idea where you're going. If it happens sooner, that would be great. If not -- and I always go back and reference I think it was the '87 season.

Chuck Long graduated and had a great career. Mark Vlasic was a fifth-year starter, got injured that year a little bit, but had a really good year. Played in the NFL for a handful of years. Then the next year we started Dan McGwire at quarterback. And then Tom Poholsky was our number two guy.

I think the only thing we were all sure of back in the spring was that Chuck Hartlieb was number three. That's included a pretty good quarterback mind in Bill Snyder. Coach Fry was a pretty good quarterback guy, too. I think that was we weren't sure what was going to happen, but we were all sure that Chuck was three.

And once we started playing games, lo and behold the guy that emerged out of the crowd was Chuck Hartlieb and he really threw the ball well during his career and really played quarterback well.

That's an example where it went into the season. You had to play games to really figure out who was who and what's what. It worked out well. But, yes, there's no way to really predict it.

Q. Tim Lester is just the offensive coordinator now and Billy's moved into that quarterbacks coaching role?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah. On the day to day. Tim's obviously going to be right there. It's a perfect alignment.

Q. And with the two wide receivers you took, Tony Diaz and Evan James, I know you haven't been able to see them too much on the field, but what kind of stood

out to you throughout the getting them to Iowa, the recruiting process? And Tony seems like he has a lot of physicality at the line of scrimmage for probably not being the biggest player on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: The first word to come to mind for me would be "production." They both had a lot of production in schools, smaller schools.

Tony's story really is interesting because their program started two years ago. Here's a guy that didn't play; he practiced every day, but didn't play. I don't know if we've ever had a player that could say that. It's a rare when a program opens but doesn't play.

It was one of those rare situations, and then last year he really caught the ball. I'm a dumb line coach, but the receiver's first job is to catch the ball and he likes to catch balls. No matter where they're at, he'll find a way to catch it. He runs well and he has a great attitude.

Both of those guys are off to a good start. We'll keep our fingers crossed.

Q. I want to ask about special teams. Is the punter from Australia here yet?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes, he's one of the incoming guys.

Q. What is your level of concern with special teams? Obviously we know the headlines -- Woods is gone, Dakin's gone, Wetjen is gone, Stevens is gone. But you seem pretty confident in Chris so what is your kind of level of concern whatever four or five months out here?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't mean this disrespectfully to LeVar because LeVar is an excellent special teams coach, but we lost some all-time performers. You talk about the job that Drew did out there at place-kicking. Our punter did a really nice job and then Wetjen, you know, I don't know if I've been around a better return guy. I don't think I have in my time.

You just talk about losing some guys that were really good performers. That's the focus right now is getting those guys where they're comfortable and then also at some point they're going to play into games. That's going to be a whole different deal for those guys, too, because outside of Eli, Eli's got experience, game experience, but for the most part it's a new territory for everybody.

It's going to be an interesting ride and hopefully we will keep getting better and better. It's one more reason for all of the core guys to do a heck of a job. I mean, we're going



to have to be really good in all phases with the other 10 guys, and then let the specialists get caught up experience-wise.

I liken it to when Drew got here, whatever it was, four years ago, how bad it was in the spring. Then he came around in the fall and did a nice job as a first-year player. It's certainly possible. That's what we're hoping for and banking on. We have to start with just taking care of the basics and then if we can get beyond that, that would be really good.

Q. We've all talked to you about quarterback for a long time. But defensive line is probably where you have the biggest crater when it comes to experience right now. You had six out of your eight rotational guys are gone, all four starters. You spend a lot of money, I guess, in the portal to try to fortify that. I know you're in the embryonic stage right now, but what are your thoughts on it so far? Has anybody emerged, I don't know if that's the right word, but is anybody standing out at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, not yet. So a couple things: It's not that you're not interested in everything going on or every position, but you nailed it, coming back on that plane ride, my two thoughts were -- we've had basically, the last two years, we've had five guys offensively going to the NFL. These three guys will go. We had two last year. Then to your point, you nailed it, six guys out of the two-deep leaving on the defensive line.

You can't microwave experience. You can't microwave girth and all those types of things.

So it's going to be a process. We may not have a tight rotation, a small rotation, maybe we're going to have to rotate guys and play more guys and just play fresher guys and keep coming at the offense, that type of deal.

We'll keep an open mind and we'll play it however it appears. Over the years we've done it a lot of different ways. But the idea is to get a group that plays well collectively when it's all said and done, that that's going to be the goal.

Right now it's early. A lot of young guys that haven't been out there a lot, getting banged around. Bryce would probably be the leading guy at this point for that. Then after that, we're building from there.

That will be something we'll watch over the next three weeks, three weeks plus this week.

Q. One of the guys you brought in, L.J. Phillips, from

South Dakota, how do you see him fitting into the running back room?

KIRK FERENTZ: I talked about production with the receivers. His personality is -- he reminds me of -- this is an endearing comment, at least from my vantage point -- Norm Granger, when he was here in the '80s. I can't tell you why, just something about his mannerisms, his personality. It's all positive. It's confidence, but it's not an arrogance. That's the way Norm was. Norm has officiated the last, I don't know, 20 years, and he's out there and he's put a few pounds on since his playing days, and you can't get him to shut up out there in the field. He has commentary on everything, but he helps us out a lot in scrimmages.

L.J.'s, he has a maturity to him. I happened to be up at one of their playoff games a year ago, December, and they had two good backs then. They beat the Tarleton State team. So L.J. didn't play two years, but he had a great year, very productive. He's a good all-around back with a great personality, great attitude. He's added to our team that way. I like his maturity level.

Q. A little bit of a bigger picture question. But with spring football, I remember last year you saying that last year's team, you noticed how close they got during spring football. How do you and the coaching staff balance individual efforts and individual analysis for their performances and then also making sure this team does gel together in ways that maybe you would like them to do, like they did last year?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a good question. It's tricky because it's competitive. Everybody's competing against each other, guys within the position groups, plus you're competing against a position group across the ball. It's interesting. The dynamics are interesting, but I think it gets back to just everybody understanding this time of year and then in August, that's the nature of it. We're going to compete against each other. It is competitive. We're trying to beat the other guy. He's trying to beat this guy, all that stuff.

But the bigger picture is we're all trying to build a team and we're all on the same team. I spent a lot of time talking about how we practice, certain rules of engagement, if you will. Easier said than done, especially new guys, they have a hard time, but just trying to stay on their feet, little things that we're avoiding senseless injuries.

All that being said, it's bringing that up in that guys have to understand it's for the betterment of the entire organization, the entire team. Sometimes you have to put what you would rather be doing ahead of maybe what's better for



everybody, and that's our job to kind of spell out where those things are.

There's going to be disagreements out there and tempers flaring and all that kind of stuff, which is fine. It's part of the game.

As long as we're leaving the field moving on. We're all teammates and those kinds of things. Just can't have things fester. But it's a challenge because it is a competitive time of year. It's that with all teams, I'm sure. It's the same thing in summer. Two times where we're going against each other every day.

It's kind of funny, but it's not so funny when it's happening. I can almost give you the -- I'll pull out a calendar and show you the day I dread walking into the staff meeting because everybody wants to kill each other. It's near the end, which is fortunate, but everybody just wants to kill each other. You know, it's time to -- we need a break and start getting ready for an opponent.

It's just the nature of what we do. It's kind of funny -- actually, it's not funny because I'm the official, so that's not funny about it. Empathy for referees, officials.

Q. We haven't seen you since the schedule came out, the 2026 schedule. You knew who you were going to play but you didn't know the order. Now you do. I'm curious your thoughts when you saw the at Michigan, at Ohio State, at Washington stretch there?

KIRK FERENTZ: Full disclosure, I didn't know who we were playing because I really don't care. I figured we were going to be playing good teams. That's one thing about being in our conference.

Whenever it came out, I did look at it. It is what it is. I mean, couple things again, nobody knows -- all of the odds are all three of those teams will be pretty good teams when we are playing them. But nobody knows who is going to be what.

I guess, to me, the moral of the story, if I've learned one thing, it's more important to worry about us. So when we do get there, whatever part of the season that is, we're going to be ready to play and take on a good opponent.

One thing for sure, in our conference you're going to play good teams. So you know that's happening. And that's week in, week out.

You think about last year, we played at a high level, from my vantage point. But the next to last one was really tough out there, too. I mean, that could have gone either way.

So just the better everybody understands it, the better we'll be as a football team. It's been the nature of coaching here. It's like every week, you've got to be ready to go.

The best way to be ready in the fall is for us being what we do and what we should do right now, doing as well as we can, knowing that we've got a lot of ground to cover. Hopefully everybody understands that. At the same time, let's not put any ceilings on ourselves either. Let's just try to get as good as we can and see where we can go.

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