

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Tim Lester

Press Conference



TIM LESTER: It's good to see everybody. We have two spring practices remaining. It's been a productive spring. Obviously, as everyone knows, we have a lot of new faces really on all three phases, but our guys have been competing trying to continue to take the next step as we evolve offensively.

Obviously everything offensively from my very first time meeting in front of you guys, comes down to the players you have and finding ways to get them the ball. We got guys that are continuing to get better. That's really what I've challenged all our guys with is finding ways to get to grow. From the guys that just got here, what is that, three months ago maybe, to the guys like Lauck and DJ Vonnahme, they need to get better, too.

So that's really our main focus. The guys have done a good job. I think we've grown, and I'm excited for where we're at, but we got a lot of work to do to move forward and get ready into summer, into camp. So far very productive. I'm proud of the guys and the work they've put in.

Q. I'm pretty sure somebody else will ask about the quarterback battle, on so I'm going to start with the wide receivers.

TIM LESTER: I'm shocked it's not the first question.

Q. We've heard a lot of buzz about Tony Diaz. I know he's been dinged up recently, but he seems like he's made a lot of plays for the first whatever it was eight no nine practices. Evan James coming in, I guess. How confident do you feel about the depth at wide receiver and what has maybe Tony and Evan and the newcomers have shown you about how you can utilize them in the passing game?

TIM LESTER: It's one of the number one answers we needed to find, right? You bring these guys in that have had success at other places, and how do they fit into what we do? How well can they pick up the schemes and the routes, and can they make plays? That's the bottom line. You put a ball up between two human beings, and some

guys just have a knack for come down with it.

Tony, he can come down with the ball. I wish he was more protective of his body. He goes for it now. He might land on his head, but he'll end up with the ball at the end.

It's been fun watching him in his first eight or nine. He wants to practice. We're trying to hold him out just because there's no need to at this point. He's just getting healthy. I think if there was a game, he might be able to go these last two because he's a super competitive kid and aggressive.

The one thing I think with Evan and Tony that they've done that's really helped the whole group is they're running routes at a certain speed. I mean, they roll. That's something that we've been looking for, and we were looking for when we hit the portal is speed. I really think it's kind of elevated the room a little bit.

Obviously DJ plays at a pretty high speed, and Reece was out maybe first week of spring, but then he came back. It was great to get him back. It was fun when we had a lot of the pieces healthy.

Obviously in spring it's up and down because it's really physical. Practice is three times a week, but hopefully we can find ways to get to those guys and use their talents. The big thing for me was figuring out what they could do. I've been very happy with both of them really.

Got to get them healthy and with Rai down in the weight room. I think they came here for a month, and they rolled right into spring ball, which is tough. I'm sure that they had great strength places that they came from, but I think Rai is the best of the best. So getting May, June, and July with him for all the new guys, but especially those two, should be huge coming into the fall.

Q. How has the race at center shaken out and the starting five for the offensive line?

TIM LESTER: TBD. I'm happy with where we're at. We've had a rotation in there. We've probably had six, seven, eight guys play center, but Pieper moving was a big story. He's done a really good job. We moved him back and forth. Cael Winter has really come along. He's had a great spring. He could play guard or center, but I think he's more



comfortable at center.

Mike Myslinski, he was doing really well. He got hurt. We got Jano back. Was happy to have him out there in pads again. He was out there flying around, and he looks comfortable. It's really who plays guard is probably secondary to who plays center. Once we figure out the center, the guard will be easy.

Trent came in here, and he's learning our system. He's a guy who came from JMU. He rolled an ankle, and he was out for a week or two. He did some really good things the other day.

There's going to be a lot of options there. We put Allgeyer in there at guard a little bit. I think he could also play tackle. I really like the numbers we're at. I don't think anything is solidified yet, but the way those guys are working, and it's just unbelievable when you have a guy like Leighton Jones. Leighton has had an unbelievable spring. He doesn't even stick out. That's a compliment. You don't even notice him. It's just like Beau is there.

Even the new guys have been in the system for two years now, so they're very comfortable with what we're doing. That group has done a great job. I think the key is to get not so much five. It's do we have six, seven, or eight? This is a physical game. It's a physical league.

I like where our numbers are at right now. It will be interesting to see how it all falls, but I've been very proud of some of those guys that are in year three and how they played. They've really got themselves into the fight, which will be decided obviously in August.

Q. What have you seen from the quarterbacks so far? What's the challenge of scheming an offense when you don't know who the quarterback is going to be yet?

TIM LESTER: It is hard. Trying to figure out which plays each of them like and they're more comfortable with. We have an unbelievable room of coaches that are helping us with the amount of data I get after every practice.

I've been really proud of both of them. They're both playing really well right now. They both improved in the areas that I asked them to improve on. I always try to make very clear goals of what I want each one of them to do in the spring, and their numbers are really close.

I had a visiting coach in my office, and we had a decent practice that he had watched, and we were going through the numbers. He was, like, man, this is a great problem to have. You have two playing well instead of having to play one because the other one is not playing well. I didn't look

at it like that, but that's great.

They're both improving. They got a long way to go. Like I said, I want everyone on the team to improve. I've been proud of each of them as I've given them the things I want them to focus on. I think they've taken that to heart and gotten better. They see them being more functional, but their completion percentage, their explosive plays, their interception numbers are all kind of where I want them.

They're not playing passive, but they're also not playing ill-advised. Like, don't be overly aggressive. We have to be smart with the ball. They've both done a really good job of that.

It's been fun. They're both getting better. I literally switched them every period. You know, it's like first period, then second period, then first period, then second period. I want them both with all the receivers, with all the centers, so they're just exposed to a lot of different things as far as the one receivers, the two receivers, the 1-0 line, 2-0 line, the one defense, the two defense, the one tight ends, the two tight ends.

Really you make it as even as possible and let them go play, and they're both doing a really good job right now. This thing is going to keep going, and that's a good thing because I think it will help both of them to continue to grow.

Q. Year one, Kaleb Johnson was your explosive play guy. Year two, didn't have that through the air either. Jeremy and Hank both pretty confident the other day that you guys could be explosive through the air this year.

TIM LESTER: Oh, that's good. I should ask them about that.

Q. What is your confidence level that you can make that step in year three of your offense?

TIM LESTER: I like the way you asked the question. My job is about being explosive. I think I said that in my opening press conference, and it will be interesting to see.

Coach does an unbelievable job of having us list who we think, and we do it like monthly, and we have to do the whole team, the leaders, the top-20 players, and who our top playmakers, who are the best leaders of the team, and we always hand it into him. I don't know what he does with it, but he's looking at it. He's keeping track.

He'll bring some old ones out. Remember two years ago on this day we had this guy not even on the list, and now he's number one. It's fun to see the growth of the players.

Yeah, year one was 100% Kaleb. Third and long, going to give it to Kaleb again, because that's our biggest chance of an explosive play, right?

Last year No. 11 ended up being our explosive play guy. He made the most. We started doing some more things and letting him run the ball and have pass options and then DJ started coming along. It was great to get Reece back. We really kind of had the last couple of games I felt we were a pretty good balance of running and throwing and being explosive.

This will be a totally new team. I've been pretty much calling practice the same way since I've been here. You've got to practice everything. Then on Saturdays you do the things you're good at, but you're always trying to improve on everything you do.

So having Tony out there has helped our explosiveness a little bit. Running the same plays we've been running. We've just been getting over the top. You like that one-on-one matchup to number two, and you like it to 81. Now you like it to 14 and eight and seven. There's more options, right?

You got to get those guys the ball. Well, there's only one way to get receivers the ball. So we've got to continue to find ways to do that. I've been coaching them up on how this offense. We still won't know until camp, right, how we have to find explosive plays. Even if we ran the triple option, you have to find ways to find explosive plays.

Really our running backs are coming along too. It will be interesting to see if Kamari, who has been great in practice, can he take the next step and get over the 100-yard mark one time? Unbelievable. He did such a good job. I couldn't believe it.

So we're going to continue, but obviously when you have some guys that are playmakers, you're going to have to get them the ball. We are doing some things. I've had a couple play series that, we'll call them, we had in for two years and never called them. You need to really have a guy. You need to have a couple of guys and one on the front and one on the back, and we can protect it and try to get a one-on-one matchup.

We tinkered with it with Wetj back out there by himself. We've been getting much better at it, because we have some of the horses that we need to get that done now. It's been fun to watch even some of our coaches, like, man, I didn't really like that play in year one, in year two, but now it's starting to look pretty good. Yeah, it's amazing. Players over plays.

So we're continuing to figure that out, but it's definitely going to look different this year than it did other years. It might change as the year goes on as we figure out what -- guys can always emerge. It's kind of a program of stories. So we'll see what the next story is, but there's definitely been some stories up front with the O-line and with Tony and Evan and even LJ in the spring. There's already starting to develop those, and it will be fun to continue to watch them grow.

Q. After a breakout season last year, DJ Vonnahme is back this season. How would you describe his emergence, and what goals do you have for him this year?

TIM LESTER: I want him to continue to grow. I hate to sound like a broken record, but there's so much he can do. We have a lot of -- everything you do is about your players. One of the main offseason projects I had was about him. There are a couple of different places around the NFL that do a good job and do some things that I think DJ can do. We've been studying them.

We've added some things to help bring his talents to light, which you won't see Saturday, but you'll see in the fall. When you have players like that, you have to find ways for them to get the ball.

We had some injuries that allowed him to move up the depth chart really fast, but I tell you, I'll never forget, the one play -- actually, I shouldn't say the one play. The one game that stuck out to me is when we played Oregon, and we had a bunch of injuries, and he had to put his hand in the dirt, which he's more of an F than a Y, but he can do both.

He had to stick his hand in the dirt and block that defensive end from Oregon, which isn't an easy task. My man rolled his hips and walked that dude right out of there a couple of times. I was, like -- I can't say what I said, but this little guy is tough. I mean, compared to the guy he was standing next to. I think he's still 6'3", 6'4", but this D-end was a monster.

The fact that he rolled his hips and walked that guy out of there was super impressive to me. It just makes him a complete player. When he's in there and is a threat to get the run game done correctly and can do what he can in the one-on-one situations on third downs, you just have a complete player.

I'm excited about some of the things we've done. I really think Ortwerth has gotten better. I think Mason Woods has taken a step this spring to do some of those DJ-type

things. I think we have some depth. It's one of the reasons I wasn't afraid to put things in that are only for DJ.

That's hard to do, because you are one play away from not having any of those again, but we do have some depth. That's a great room for us right now. So we're trying to continue to do things to use them all and I'm excited to watch him continue to get better.

Q. With the quarterback situation, do you have a time frame of when you want to have a starter, one, and then, two, is there something you want to see from each of them that it would be, okay, that's my guy?

TIM LESTER: They've shown me what I've asked for. Hank is super efficient. He's on time with everything. He's like a machine. He's a little bit like Mark in that my biggest fear with him is that he was going to go out there, complete 80% of his balls for 20 yards, complete 17 of 20 for 17 yards and never be aggressive, right?

I think he has more explosive plays than anybody right now. I think he has 29 passes of 15 or more. Finding that balance, which is what Mark had to find. From the beginning of the year to the end of the year, if you watch Mark, his biggest jump was in understanding when to be aggressive and when not.

It helped getting Vander Zee back to have that one-on-one guy that you trust to go throw the ball to. That was my challenge with him.

Then with Heck it was more, hey, we need to make sure we operate within the offense and not take every single chance with a ball. You might throw 30 touchdowns but 40 picks, and he's kept his pick number down and still been aggressive and been smart about it.

They've been doing that exactly -- that was the goal number one for both of them. They've both done a great job right now. There's really not a time frame. There's part of me thinking it would be great if it was clear by a certain -- by the end of spring or by camp -- it's not even close to clear. It's a good problem to have. It's definitely going to go into camp. It could go into the season. I don't even know.

I like where they're both at. They're both operating at a high level. If they can keep both growing, then I feel like we're going to have multiple options come the fall, which obviously are for my first year here with the more we can have healthy, the better and playing well, so we don't have two running backs and a safety as a backup as a third stringer. Hopefully we can keep them healthy, but I'm happy with where they're they at.

Jimmy Sullivan has really taken strides, too. Watching him and Fitz is doing a great job. Fitz is on time, on target, really smart football player. Jimmy is extremely talented and just the game is slowing down for him. He got here spring last year, so it's his second spring, although he's a true freshman. He's got an unbelievable arm. His feet and his timing are getting better.

We literally time every single time they take a snap to when they throw the ball, so I have a number on them. He is starting to make decisions and his time to throw, TTT, for Pro Football Focus geeks out there, which I love, but we do that in our own practices. His numbers are starting to come down where he's processing and getting rid of the ball on time. I want him to keep coming because the more we can have in there, the merrier.

Q. I wanted to ask about running backs. That's a room that looks pretty deep on paper. Specifically with the addition of LJ. When we were talking to Jay last week, he described him like a bowling ball with butcher knives or some variation of that. I'm curious, what have you seen out of him and what he was able to do at South Dakota and how he will fit in with this room?

TIM LESTER: It was fun watching his highlight tape. He came on his official visit with his dad and uncle, two of my favorite people I've ever met in my life, his dad and his uncle. The apple doesn't fall too far, so when you meet the parents, you learn a little bit about the human being. Unbelievable family.

Showed up. Obviously we have Kamari in the room, and we have everybody coming back. Much like Mark did last year, just showed up and worked. As far as he fits our program very well, just like Mark did.

He's fit in seamlessly. As you get into spring, you see the ball, and you see what is he about? He runs behind his pads very well. It's impressive as you are trying to find who is your short yardage back, third down back, who is the best at pass pro. First and second downs, those are the easy downs, but on third down, the down that matters, or a third and one, fourth and one, who do you want in there?

I've been very impressed with his short yardage capabilities. He has great vision. You can tell he has played a lot of football. You don't run for 1,900 yards without having some skill.

You don't know how long the transition is going to take to a new offense. They ran a lot of the same stuff we did, but the wide zone is probably different, and he's really comfortable with it. You see him make one mistake with

his angles and his shoulders, and then it's fixed like a veteran does. You tell him once, and they're on to the next thing. He's a huge addition.

I do like the way the young kids are coming along. I really like the jump Kamari has made. Even as the year went on, I thought Kamari got better and better, and he's continued to do that. We have a lot of competition. It's going to be fun to watch them as the fall comes.

Q. You said last year something you wanted Hank to get better at is when the play breaks down, improving his decision-making. How have you seen him develop in that regard? Also, when you are not tackling quarterbacks into a little bit of a different thing when the play breaks down, is there anything you can do to kind of simulate that?

TIM LESTER: I know you don't get to come to practice a lot, but our quarterbacks end up on the ground quite a bit. It's a pretty physical deal out there, which is good. I like it when they do. They throw and get bumped a little bit or they're running and get bump and have to go down.

I think the biggest thing, and maybe I misspoke on Hank, is getting him to deal with the gray better, right? When the coverages are not clear and there's some teams like ours that disguise coverage well, you need to figure out what they're in, and you are wasting -- I always say you have 2.6 seconds on a drop-back pass to make a decision. You have a ticking time bomb in your hand. If you are wasting 1.2 seconds figuring out what coverage they're in, you don't have a lot of time once you do figure out to get the job done.

That's why I think our defense has been good for such a long time. We play some teams I can tell the coverage the moment we get to the line of scrimmage. That's not the way against Phil. So you train in a very tough environment, which is great. He's been really good.

I think the thing that he's done such a good job of that I've been really focusing on is just his knee bend, his body posture. He's a little bit tall. He is tall, but I want him to play like he's 5'11". If you see him, tell him to be 5'11" because when he plays lower, he thinks faster, he moves in the pocket better. There's not as much up and down.

The one thing you learn about up and down when it comes to quarterbacking, is you lose vision. Anyone that's ever run and the ball is going like this, that means you probably don't run right. The ball should be smooth. He's done a really good job with his lower body and getting under control.

We started with him on that in December. It's grown leaps and bounds from December in bowl prep at really dialing into his kinetics of his body and making sure trying to -- you don't really mess with guy's throwing motions too often. I'm not really messing with his motion. I'm messing with his body, getting his base better.

He has bought into it and kind of taken himself to the next level as far as just what he looks like in the pocket and comfortable progressing from one to two to three because he's prepared. He's in an athletic position, you know? You can tell everybody until you're blue in the face what you want them to do until they believe it, you know, and he's now seen the product of, you know, what having a better posture can do for him.

It's been fun to watch him. It's not perfect, right, but it's been getting better. Every time it's better, he's progressing better, he's thinking faster. He's moving in the pocket better, because he's pretty fast.

I don't know who is the faster of two. Hank might be faster. I think Heck is quicker. Neither one of them is a non-athlete, which is kind of fun.

So it does make the planning your offense a little bit easier because they are -- I know they look different, but they're similar athletes, you know? I've been happy with where he's been. It's all started with his body, and that's helped everything else out because he's more prepared to make decisions faster.

Q. You still are pretty hands-on with the quarterback, but with Billy taking over as the quarterbacks coach and you getting a more over see perspective on the offense, what's that adjustment process been like? What advantages does it have in getting Billy in step with what you want from the quarterbacks? What was that process like?

TIM LESTER: I've known Billy forever. I recruited Billy out of high school. I got Billy a scholarship. He'll give me a bunch of crap for saying that. I didn't want to play against him because he was going to go to a rival school of ours, so I called the D2 guy and got him so I didn't have to play against him.

I've known Billy for a very long time. I told Coach Ferentz when I got here that I wanted to build this quarterback room like an NFL quarterback room. I know a lot of people aren't familiar with how that works, but not much has changed for me other than I have more help.

I got a call several years back to be a potential quarterback coach at an NFL team, and my response was, you know,

the only thing I may be a little bit uncomfortable is running the meeting room. The guy laughed at me. He's, like, you think you would run the meeting room? The head coach runs the meeting room. Whoever is calling the plays runs the meeting room.

So you are on meeting room has not changed one bit. I'm running it, but I got two guys looking at it instead of one now. Two guys that came from this offense, that understand this offense. So it's been awesome.

You know, when it comes to recruit and watching twice as many films, things that I always felt like I would be chasing my tail on with some of the recruiting stuff and getting ahead on some of the younger quarterbacks and communicating with people. If the quarterbacks want one-on-one time and I'm game planning or sitting with the run game, pass game, red zone guy, short yardage guys, someone that they can talk to that I trust implicitly, but that's the way it is.

Normally whoever is calling the plays runs the quarterback meeting room, and then if I have to leave the room for some reason, which I don't think I'll ever have to, then Billy could take over. I would trust him 100%.

It's been refreshing. I think it was my first month here when they passed that unlimited coaches rule, and I think it might have been right after my opening press conference. I forget. I went right into Coach's office and said, hey, now that there's unlimited coaches, I would be shocked in the next ten years if everybody doesn't have a quarterback coach and an offensive coordinator. It's only the biggest position in football. You know, why not put two people in there that are with those people 24/7.

It's slowly happening, and it's finally happening here. I think it's great for our players. It's great for me. It's great that it's Billy, because it's a guy that I trust that knows our system, which is awesome.

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