

ReliaQuest Bowl: Vanderbilt vs Iowa

Wednesday, December 31, 2025

Tampa, Florida, USA

Raymond James Stadium

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Postgame Press Conference



Iowa 34, Vanderbilt 27

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll start out by saying this is exactly why bowl games are significant and important. Today was a really special day for our team and what a great environment, what a great place to host a game. Outstanding opponent to compete against.

Today we saw out there two very resilient, very competitive football teams. A ton of respect for Vanderbilt coming in. Even more so now. So just can't say enough about them.

Really proud of our guys and the effort that they exerted out there and the way they competed and played it right until the end. Obviously it was a hard-fought game, both teams really going in. It's a great feeling. Great way to end the season.

We have 27 outstanding seniors on this football team. Those guys really took it over starting in January. We've had some tough losses this year, but one thing they've done is shown up and competed each and every time.

Just really gratifying to see them walk out with a win. And Mark, and representative of all the guys that we have, Mark has only been with us a little bit shorter than the other guys, but just fit right in.

And just really happy for all the guys. Happy for our entire team and our staff, our fans, right down the line there, especially these seniors. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Coach, talk about the guy (Mark Gronowski). He's a quarterback with a fullback mentality and a physique, but he also comes with two national championships. How does that fit?

KIRK FERENTZ: I said yesterday you evaluate quarterbacks by how they move their teams and if they're winners or not, and that's kind of like a pitcher in baseball.

The other component is the players on the team believing in that player.

The good quarterbacks I've been around, that's what it is. There's all sizes, shapes, descriptions. Probably two of the better ones in the country are playing today, in my opinion, against each other. Very different players, but very -- just fit the bill of what I just described.

I can't say enough about Mark. At times it's painful to watch in practice. He'll do some things where I go, Really? When we get on the game field, he is a guy everybody believes in, coaches, players. Just competes out there tooth and nail. Big part of the reason we won today was obviously his leadership and his impact on the game.

Q. As you often do, the defense succeeds big-time. That's what happened in the first half. You got the lead. I think you brought them to the ground in that opening half. What was working so well with your pass rush?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's what football is. Nobody wants to hear it, but going into the game, I was hoping for a Missouri score, 17-10, with us being 17, not them. You know, I was kind of hoping maybe we could keep it that way.

They're a really explosive, dynamic team offensively. A great first half on the offensive side, and to their credit, they made some adjustments and came out and went a little tempo at times and just got us on our heels a little bit. Tale of two halves. That's what makes football so interesting.

Q. How about the effort of Karson? He had a huge first half too and really helped get you guys going.

KIRK FERENTZ: He's one of those seniors. He hasn't started until this year, and we've had some really good linebackers at our place -- one of them is down here playing with the Buccaneers that, you know, he just -- he's been an excellent special teams guy and then certainly this year, has played outstanding football.

It's kind of fun to watch him because each week early in

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

the season, once he started really to figure out how to size things up, he started really playing effectively. I would say from third, fourth game on, he's just been playing at a high clip and just a really explosive football player.

Q. You've been making the 2008 comparison for a while that this team is one of your favorite of all time. Does this result complete that comparison?

KIRK FERENTZ: It really does. The big difference I alluded to is just the teams that beat us. All due respect to those teams that beat us in that season, but you know, we'll see how it all turns out.

I look at Indiana and Oregon as two of the best teams anywhere, and I think are in the top five. If either one wins it all, it wouldn't shock me at all. I'm certainly no expert on that stuff. You watch more of it globally than I do.

Being on the field with those two teams were really good. Southern Cal, not a bad football team either. Iowa State was a highly ranked team when we played them.

Each game, those were all tough, hard-fought, play here, play there, and it's a different outcome. That's football. The good thing about our guys, they never went backwards and kept focusing on what the opportunities were in front of them.

So to beat a ranked team, a deservedly ranked team, a ten-win, SEC football team, that's really gratifying, and the seniors, everybody can feel good about that.

Q. You said you're going to come back next season already. Can you talk about how enjoyable it is to coach? How does a team like this keep you young?

KIRK FERENTZ: I was just thinking about that a while ago. It was five hours before kickoff. No matter when you play, I thought it would be pretty easy near kickoff. Those five hours, that's when the monsters kind of appear and get in your head a little bit. Otherwise, I enjoy the whole week. There's something about it.

But I do want to go back and set the record straight, because I was asked that question at that press conference, and I said, yeah, I plan on being back. Then all of a sudden it looked like I made a proclamation, I'll be back. I never made a proclamation, for the record. I did answer the question. Yeah, I'll be back for next season. I think my sights were a little further down the road than next season, but powers that be will decide that.

I feel great and enjoy what I'm doing. You get to work with the people I work with on a daily basis and our staff -- you

know, I'm trying to keep our marriage together, too -- so I think all those things combined all work out.

Q. You and Clark both talked yesterday about how bowl games still matter. And especially today to see two starting quarterbacks not opt out and both play, how important is that as well that the fans and everyone got to see both starting quarterbacks and it still matters to you guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: College football has changed so much, and I've seen it for a long time. If you have the right guys, it hasn't changed. That's what you enjoy about it.

I'm not being accusatory or judgmental on anybody.

We've created an environment -- we, the adults, created an environment -- where it's really hard right now for players. It's hard for the people that are raising those players. If we're not careful, we're going to strip away what's really good about college football and what's great about competing.

One thing we believe in recruiting, we look hard enough, there are guys out there. We'll find the right one. Again, these two quarterbacks there may be representative. They're not cookie-cutter, 6'4", John Elway, throw-the-ball guys, but both of them are just really good football players, and I think there are a lot of guys on both teams that kind of maybe fit that bill.

I'm hopeful we can get this thing under control a little bit, the global college football situation, but we got some work to do, unfortunately.

Q. I want to ask a couple of special teams-related questions. Been coaching over 45 years. I want to know if you have ever seen any illegal kicking called after a punter crossed the line of scrimmage? There were some special teams important plays today. I want to hear if that's a fitting way for LeVar Woods to have his last game as special teams coordinator.

KIRK FERENTZ: It is. For the record, I was more ticked off about us not having contain over there, when the guy rolled to the right, thank God we didn't. Full disclosure, I didn't know the rule. The guy on our sideline did know the rule, and he said to me, you know, you can go a generation or a career and not experience one of those.

Also, for the record, Tyler Parker did know the rule, and he said over our headset, We're going to get the ball, which that was really great.

LeVar has done a great job with our special teams for quite

a while now. Every play on special teams is, in my mind, critical and important to the success of the football team. For us it's always been that way.

The last kickoff were they kind of blooped it down there, the possession there was really critical, and that's not a routine play. LeVar has done a wonderful job, and he'll continue to do so. I know that. Appreciate his efforts too.

Q. You mentioned one of the benefits of a bowl is the fact that you get an extra month to play, and the team gets to enjoy that extra month. What has this extra month meant for this group of seniors to be able to have those relationships with them, see them flourish and win awards and win the football game?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's what we enjoy, being together and having a chance -- football, you think about it, we played 13 games since January, or since September, August, whenever we got started there. The time in football that you work, invest in working, compared to a chance to compete, it's not like Major League Baseball where you play 162. The time together working at it is so much more proportionally.

If you got guys that don't like each other or guys that don't like working, it doesn't work well. We're looking for those kinds of guys that really understand what it takes to be good and don't mind putting it in. Then the camaraderie that develops typically usually takes months for that to really develop, but this group starting in January just had a little bit different vibe than maybe what we are used to.

It's really showed up on the field, which is a great thing.

Q. You always talk about the foundation is the offensive line, defensive line. Those two units probably played their best football today I thought. Just can you speak to that and having the O-line up there on the stage with you guys to celebrate?

KIRK FERENTZ: I was more excited. Something else I like about quarterbacks -- quarterbacks understand the line help them out. I tell the guys, if you don't have a center, you would never get the ball, so just shut up. The most valuable guy out there out there. It speaks I think to the understanding our guys have of how things work. One thing depends on another.

Clark said it yesterday, being good up front is really important, and especially in a conference like the SEC. Unfortunately, as we move forward, we're going to graduate a lot of those guys, so now the work begins to get some guys not necessarily to grow up, but just harden up a little bit more and be able to compete in a game like this

one today, because it was a long day.

Q. How has this team been different than other teams that you've coached?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, I've got five children. My wife and I have five children. It's hard to compare them, because all you do is get in trouble. It's been one of the most enjoyable teams I've ever worked with at any level, at any time. They had a special chemistry.

It would have been great to go undefeated. No one would complain about that. But sometimes you learn more about people and teams when it's not going well. Today was representative of that. There were a lot of ups and downs today, but we responded. We responded, and some days the defense responded when it's not going great offensively and vice versa. That's the beauty of the game and finding an answer, it takes the right people. That's what these guys did a great job of today.

Q. You said after the Nebraska game that this team deserved to get that eighth regular season win. You guys have been wanting to get a ranked win, and you have been closer, closer, and closest. How did this team rally together for the one final stand? I know how important this game was for you so they could get that.

KIRK FERENTZ: So the word "deserved" or "justice," those are strong words for football, right? As a guy watching, you just hope for good things to happen for guys that deserve it.

These guys certainly deserved it, and they finished the season. We had the two tough losses coming out of the last break. Come back and win a game where it was hard as hell to win that thing, and then go out and ends up not being that challenging after we got going in that last game.

Then you got the whole month of December. And speaking of monsters in your head, it's such a long, drawn-out month. You're not focused on the game necessarily until about nine, ten days ahead. So you have to go through all those periods. It doesn't always look great, and all the things that you are worried about.

Ultimately, I tell myself it will show up on the field, what we did or didn't do. Again, it goes back to these guys just doing a good job just gradually keep climbing and getting better, and I think it certainly showed up today out there on the field.

Q. You came up with Clint Eastwood yesterday.

KIRK FERENTZ: 97-year-old or whatever he was. Not the young guy.

Q. Isn't that what football is, the good, the bad, and the ugly?

KIRK FERENTZ: No question. I've seen it all too. Today was good and beautiful. Yeah, it's all good. Thank you very much.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports