

TransPerfect Music City Bowl: Missouri vs Iowa

Sunday, December 29, 2024

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Nissan Stadium

Elijah Drinkwitz

Missouri Tigers

Kirk Ferentz

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coaches Press Conference



playing sound football.

Excited about the opportunity. We have a lot of seniors that this is going to be their final football game for the Missouri Tigers and what a wonderful legacy that they leave to have an opportunity to finish out their careers the right way. So we're excited about that.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. You mentioned those seniors. What are the last few days and the weeks since the regular season been like taking in the final moments with this group?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: You know, there's a ton of construction going on in Faurot Field right now, and right before we left they had already tore down all the bricks in the north end zone. It was just a reminder of all the hard work that this senior class has done.

I told those guys before we left that none of this would be possible if it wasn't for them, their resiliency, their toughness, their commitment to seeing it through. So I have a lot of appreciation for all of them, whether it's guys who have been here the whole time, whether it's Drake Heismeyer, Mitch, Will Norris, Brady Cook, or whether it's the transfers who believed in us, Joseph Charles to Kristian Williams, Johnny Walker, who was here the whole time. All of those guys. Nate Noel, coming this year. All of those guys hold a special place in Mizzou football history.

Q. You have talked about before with the era of changing rosters, and personnel is going to change every single year, but being able to commit yourself to really building a sustainable program that won't change throughout. Can you expand a little bit more on what those steps look like for you day in and day out and what gives you confidence that this is something that is not just a flash in the pan, but continued success?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Oh, wow. Well, I think in order to have the sustained culture you have to have a foundation.

THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. We're going to start with hearing from University of Missouri Head Coach Elijah Drinkwitz. Coach Drinkwitz will make some opening remarks and then we'll open it up to questions.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: First, I would like to say thank you to the city of Nashville, the TransPerfect Music City Bowl, the hotel here. They've just been a wonderful host for our team, our fans, and our families. We've just had an outstanding experience and appreciate the hospitality.

Bowl games are still a great experience for our student-athletes and for college football, and this is an outstanding bowl game, and we tip our hat to Nashville and everybody who hosted. It's been an awesome thing.

Our football team is excited. One of the things you look forward to is obviously the host city, but also the competition that you get to play against and the opportunity to play against a traditional powerhouse in Iowa. I have a tremendous amount of respect for Kirk Ferentz and what he has done with the Hawkeye football team over the course of his 26-year career.

He is the gold standard of college football and what it takes to build and sustain a program of success and excellence, player development. So it's a real honor to be on the same football field with him and his program, and our team knows that in order for us to have a chance, we're going to have to play a clean football game.

You watch these bowl games. It's going to come down to turnovers and takeaways, tackling, and penalties. We've got to be clean in those areas to give ourselves a chance. One of the Hallmarks of Coach Ferentz' football teams is they just don't beat themselves. They force the other team into mistakes, and we're going to have to do a nice job of



Each year you have to relay that foundation.

I think as long as we are consistent in who we are with development an elite edge in the strength and conditioning program, as long as we continue to focus on our core values and understand what the goal for our program is, it's front and center in everything we do.

We want to chase two dreams. That's a life of football. That's a life outside of the game. We want to make sure that we play for championships, and obviously playing in a bowl game is an opportunity to play for a championship.

We want to develop an elite EDGE, which is energy, details, grit, and emotional consistency, in everything we do. Combine that with our four core values... always compete. We want to have a competitive culture that's always pushing to be the very best we can be.

We want to build trust is and respect, which is the foundation of any relationship, and that's what you are going to have to have with your players when they come in. If you are bringing in transfers, freshmen, or the current guys, there has to be a foundation of trust and respect to build a brotherhood so those guys will go out and compete and finish.

I was talking to Coach Ferentz last night. When you look across college football, I think our two programs have done a really good job. We've had two opt-outs I think on both sides because of potential NFL futures and careers, and we totally understand that, but the rest of the senior classes are wanting to play, and they want to play together for the brotherhood.

That was something that D-Rob and Kris Abrams-Draine and those guys, J.C., started last year, and I think it's something that Johnny Walker and Brady Cook want to continue. I know those guys' leadership will continue to exist with the next generation coming, the next group of players.

College football is changing, and you can't predict the future. We just got rocked last week with new rules for junior college. Every day there's a new change, but I think you have to be adaptable, and you have to have a core mission of what you believe in.

For us we believe in chasing two dreams. We believe in developing elite EDGE, and we believe in playing for championships. That's the mission. If you want to come to the University of Missouri, you have to believe in those things, and you have to be willing to abide by the core values that we have. If you do that, it's a great fit for us.

Q. Coach, speaking of the JUCO ruling, what do you feel about that, and how does that unpack someone like Triston Newson who we know did the JUCO route?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I've come to the point that I realize my opinion really doesn't matter. Until there's somebody actually in charge of college football, our opinions are just a wasted breath, and people take those opinions and twist them and turn them however they want to.

They either use it against a coach, or they use it to prove their point on social media. It's really a waste of time. I think for me and for our program it's about utilizing the new rule change to try to benefit your program to the best way possible and be adaptable, like I said. I'm not going to get caught up in making bold statements and all that. I think at the end of the day for me it's just about whatever the rules are.

I said this in COVID. There's a scene in Apollo 13 where they're trying to figure out how to get the three-man crew into the shuttle, and they take this bag of stuff and they dump it out. All right, guys, you have to figure out how to get this filter to fix this.

That's kind of what we're doing with the NCAA. Right now we just take a bag and stuff and say, Here are the rules, and we have to figure it out. We do that.

We take conversations with Triston. It's up to him. We would love to have him back. We welcome him back with open arms. Obviously it affects a lot of different people. It affects our roster count. You know, to do that after the portal has been open and after people have signed and all that is a little bit tricky, but he's one of us. So if he is one of us, he is always welcome.

Q. Coach, talking about the program you're building, what would it mean to get across the ten-win threshold for back-to-back years?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I'm not really caught up in the outcome of that. I think obviously for us it's an opportunity to play for a championship, and that's the single focus for us. It's an opportunity to play for the TransPerfect Music City Bowl Championship.

The long-term effects besides that I'm not caught up in SEC versus Big Ten. I'm not caught up in any of that. This is really a stand-alone game. It's really different than what you had at the end of the season because of the free agency period that occurs. So for us -- I hate to be like this, but it's really an exhibition game. For us it's an opportunity to go take our players and play one last time together.

If you are fortunate enough to win, it catapults you into next year. If you don't, then you came up short and you fly back home and celebrate the new year, and you start all over. I don't know that it carries more significance than that.

Q. When it comes to exhibition game, as you just mentioned, there was a lot of younger guys here that have been looking for an opportunity to play and have this develop into these 15 practices. Just how has that gone? What have you seen from these guys because knowing that the transfer portal does exist and some guys might leave, that you might have thought, Oh, this is going to be a great time to develop them. They're gone. How much of your energy and focus goes into the guys that are still there and trying to be part of Mizzou next year going forward after this game?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: That is a good question. We are a developmental program we always have been. We played Monday Night Football with our underclassmen to try to consistently get them better. That's part of the process. The only way to get better at football is to practice, and you have to have a mindset that always improves, right?

So for us what a great opportunity for some of our underclassmen. Marquis and Josh Manning are going to step up into bigger roles this game. With the injury to Brett Norfleet, it allows Jordon and Tyler and potentially Jude James to have a bigger role.

On the defensive side of the ball there are some younger guys. Nick Rodriguez and Jeremiah Beasley should get more reps.

We're excited about that opportunity. As far as, I've said this before, we had an unbelievable event last night. I appreciate the Music City Bowl hosting an event at the Gaylord Opry and being able to listen to some songwriters talk about a few different things.

One of the songwriters had moved to Nashville. She had been here for nine years. When she first got here, she had no idea what it would take to become a professional writer. You don't just walk up and get hired. You have to work, and you have to survive. You have to sustain, and you have to go through some tough times.

She actually started a dog sitting business. I'm not going to use the word, but she had this dog sitting business. She would go and babysit dogs of famous country music city artists, and she would follow them and pick up their business in the grass. She's, like, I'm chasing my dream doing this, right?

She's a wildly successful writer who has had three No. 1s in the last two years, and it was just for me a reminder that I wish my players could hear that story because there's no such thing as an instant success. Whether or not you are recruited based off your potential, no matter where you go, you have to develop. You've got to get better.

You see all these guys jumping in the portal after six months of being on campus, and that's just not real life. That's like a country music writer or star. You drive up and down Broadway, and there's people playing in every single bar, and they're extremely, extremely talented. There's 132 Division I football teams, and everybody has talent. Talent is not enough. You have to work hard. You have to face the tough stuff and keep pressing forward.

So I hope that our players will continue to embrace that and learn from it and understand that just because you don't hit -- just because you're not where you want to be right now doesn't mean that door is closed. It just means you have to keep knocking.

Q. Looking at Iowa's defense, what do you think has allowed them to be so successful, not just this season, but have them to be as successful as they have been for many years in recent memory?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Obviously continuity, right? They do an outstanding job with their defensive scheme. I will say this. They do have nuanced change. Whether you go back and watch them from five years ago, ten years ago, they have developed and made changes each and every year.

But there's a consistency to what they do. You know fundamentally they're going to be really good. You know the front six is a veteran group. They've played a lot of football together. Their two safeties know exactly where they're at in the fits. They can play man-to-man out there on the corner positions. They're going to win one-on-ones. They make you earn every inch.

It's a really challenging scheme to go against. It's why they've been wildly successful, but they have program alignment. Their offense complements their defense. Their defense complements their special teams. You know what they're trying to do in order to win the game.

It's a real challenge. You have to beat the whole team. You can't just beat one person. You can't just beat one matchup. You have to beat the whole team in order to have a chance to win.

Q. Can you speak to quarterback Cook's leadership,



his skills in weathering some tough injuries, and what he's meant to your program?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, what a wonderful example of sticking to it, right, of fighting through adversity, ignoring the outside noise, and just focusing on getting better?

He's a young man who from day one wanted to be here and has had to endure, whether it's been injuries from shoulder, whether it's been injuries this season, he's always put the team first. He's always tried to improve. He's always tried to be a leader.

I think back to the South Carolina game. X-rays his wrist. It still shows a break. It's his call. It's 100% his call. Can you play? It's up to you. We would never put you in jeopardy. As long as it was his call, he was going to play.

That's rare these days. For him to be out there this week with so much bright future ahead of him, he wouldn't miss it because it means something to play with his teammates. It means something to put that Missouri Tiger uniform on. That's the college football that we all know and love and believe in and are excited about.

He drives a really nice Ford Bronco. He's benefitting from NIL. So there's no negatives to it. He's doing it the right way. He's earning every bit of the money he's gotten for all the crap he's had to take over the years. It's been awesome.

Obviously 20-5 in the last two seasons. He's got a chance -- I think he's tied for second in all-time career wins as the starting quarterback at the University of Missouri. So he's had an outstanding career, and he's a guy that's going to be remembered at the university.

Q. You talk about this free agency period. A dozen guys, more than that, have chosen to come to the University of Missouri, play for you. What's your message there and why they decided to come here?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, I think the first thing is they're not really playing for me. They're playing for us, and they're playing with our brotherhood. It's never going to be about me. It's going to be about our university, our brotherhood, the environment that we create, and the opportunity that we have.

I think we're not for everybody. We're very selective in how we approach the recruiting process, the transfer portal. We recruit a specific style and a specific player. We were able to get the right guys.

Very appreciative to Laird and Marcy and the board and

several key boosters for being very active and helping us raise the money that we needed in order to be an attractive place. People can like me all they want, but if I don't pay them, they ain't coming.

I don't mean that like that. If they don't have NIL opportunities, then they're not coming. So you have to have the competitive NIL market. Sorry, Marcy. I know that's going to get me in trouble, but tell the other GC I'm sorry.

Q. Speaking of quarterback, you just brought one in in Beau Pribula. What does he bring to the team?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I want to focus on the bowl game. We'll talk about that when those guys get on campus.

This is really about this group of young men. This is about this game, this opportunity.

We're excited about those signees, but this is about the Music City Bowl. This is about the group of men that are here, and this is about Brady Cook and his opportunity to lead this football team one last time.

Q. Can you talk about Kris Williams' leadership on the D-line and what he has meant for this team this year?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, Kristian, as a transfer from Memphis, went out to Oregon. Wasn't the right fit for him. Comes back. When you talk about a guy with an elite EDGE, he's got the same energy every day. He focuses on details. He takes notes. Every meeting he's going to have his notebook out writing notes.

Grit... during fall camp he sleeps in the building, and he's gotten other defensive linemen to do the same thing. He wears his shoulder pads to the team meeting. He comes fully taped to every team meeting so that he's prepared to go straight to practice from meetings.

It's just his mindset, his edge, and he's consistent every single day. I'm very proud of -- you can talk about Brady and Johnny and Mitch and Drake, but man, there was this influx of transfers who bought into the culture.

Kristian Williams is one of those guys. Joseph Charleston is one of those guys. Tre'Vez Johnson is one of those guys. Cam Johnson is one of those guys. Champ Flagg this year is one of those guys.

Sometimes you bring in transfers, and it's so new and maybe they don't quite fit. Man, these guys sacrificed their egos and said, Hey, look, let's just be a part of the brotherhood. It's not about my role. It's about our role as a

team. How do we become better as a team? Kristian kind of has personified that throughout our program for the last three seasons.

Q. Sticking with the defense, tomorrow will wrap up Coach Batoon's first season as defensive coordinator with the team. How has he grown more comfortable with the program as a whole throughout the season?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: You know, this is going to be one of those great deals where you get a chance to visit with Kirby and Corey. You get to ask them those questions.

I don't want to speak for him on what he has gotten more comfortable with, but I will say this. It's been a great working relationship. I think the defensive staff has grown with more and more synergy and understanding of each other in what we're trying to do.

We have a saying. Low ego, high output within our coaching staff and preference versus performance. I think Corey has done an outstanding job of being exactly that, low ego, high output. What's best for our defense? What's best to put our players in a position of success? It's not about what anybody prefers. It's about how do we get the best performance out of this group of men that we have?

We've had some deficiencies throughout the year, and I think our defensive staff has done a really good job of masking those deficiencies, playing to our strengths, and getting the best out of our guys to put us in a position to play in this bowl game.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach Drinkwitz.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Ferentz, if you'll join us up here. We'll have remarks from Coach. Coach Ferentz.

KIRK FERENTZ: Thank you. I really appreciate being here. Good afternoon to everybody. It's great to be back in the TransPerfect Music City Bowl. We had a great experience here two years ago, and this one has been equally good.

Fortunately, we didn't bring the snow with us this time, but everybody has been great. The hospitality extended, it's just been a tremendous experience for our players, for our staff. We're simply thrilled to be here representing the Big Ten.

Just an overview real quick, a lot is written about bowls and said about bowls, and these are changing times in college football, but each one of these games is significant. Anybody that's ever competed I think realizes any time you go out there and put whatever it is you do on display, you

are going to try to do your best. That's certainly what this is all about.

This is our 22nd invitation to a bowl game since I've been at Iowa, and each one has been special, and they've been important. So, again, we're just thrilled to be here.

I think our players have done a nice job. Bowls are really interesting. You've got the bowl week, which quite frankly, is a story in itself, and that's a different challenge, but you get the month.

So it's a long time for the players. The initial part, you know you're bowl eligible and you don't know where you are going or who you are going to play. Then you get to the place where the game is two, two and a half weeks out.

It's tough to focus specifically on your opponent at that point. Then you get into the phase where you are onsite. You have to navigate through being in a hotel, being in a city that's probably got a little bit more to offer than what our guys are used to on a daily basis. So they have to navigate that.

I think the guys have really done a good job staying focused, and it's going to take that to play a good game against Missouri. They've got an outstanding football team.

Just a couple of words about them. You look at them on film. They're really good offensively. Obviously very balanced. They have two outstanding running backs, guys we have a lot of respect for. Good offensive line.

They've got a good receiver corps. I know they're miss a guy or two there too, if you include the tight ends, but the guy No. 1 is a really good football player.

The whole key to their offense is a quarterback. He's just done a wonderful job with his career. Really good football player. To me he's the catalyst for their offensive football team.

Defensively they look like an SEC defense. They're big and physically up front. A lot of guys, and they rotate guys through. They have some good guys up there. No. 15 is just a really outstanding player, very productive guy.

Special teams, same thing. Good specialists and good size. Really appreciate what special teams can do to impact the game. They've done a good job there.

I think if you look at a couple of things that I always peek at is just penalties an opponent might have, the penalty situation, their ball security, take-away deal, and the other thing is time of possession. Missouri checks all those

boxes. They do a great job which indicates they're very well-coached. They pay attention to things that are important and know what to do there.

As far as we go, I think our team has practiced well. They did a good job handling the month of preparation that way. We're going to have to be. We have to be focused. We're going to have to be at our best to have a chance playing this challenge.

Bowls are important certainly. It's a chance to be together, first and foremost, for another month. Secondly, it gives us a chance for younger players to get work and get some exposure that we wouldn't normally get and watch and see how they progress, that type of deal.

Most importantly, it's a chance for the entire team to be together one more time to compete one more time and the seniors to wear the jersey one more time and hopefully add to the win total that we've had this year. Again, we're just looking forward to the challenge.

A couple of things I'll just share with you personnel-wise. We have three of our players that will not be available medically. Logan Jones will not be able to go. Didn't make it there. Seth Anderson suffered an injury a couple of weeks ago, and he is not going to be able to go. I don't see that happening. Koen Entringer, same thing. We have three guys that won't be able to go, and another guy I just want to mention, Kyler Fisher, one of our seniors, has an unmet eligibility requirement, which is kind of ironic. I can give you a whole commentary on college athletics today. He's a graduate, but he has an unmet requirement there.

He's not going to be able to compete. He's been with us. I just want to take a minute to talk about him because to me he's what's good about college football. We hear about all these crazy stories. A little slip there, so he missed something, an assignment, whatever it may have been. He's chosen to stay with the team. He's a senior and has practiced each and every day, been on the look squad. That was not beneath him. He's been doing a great job working against our defense.

I think the story, the depth of things and why this is important. Walked on here from a small town in Iowa. We've had a real history of walk-ons doing special things for us.

Three years ago I wasn't sure he liked football, quite frankly, just watching him in the weight room and watching him in our program. It's not that he wasn't disinterested. Just didn't look like he was really enjoying things.

I'm not sure what happened to him, but this happens to a

lot of guys in college. Somewhere along the way, somewhere year two and three, something just happened for him, and he's just done an unbelievable job.

Hasn't started. We've had some pretty good linebackers. Hasn't started on the inside positions, but he was our starter outside and has been an unbelievable player in special teams the last couple of years.

A great leader. Everything he does is first-class. I just want to single him out. It's unfortunate he won't play, but he's been here doing a great job, and he'll be on the sidelines with us tomorrow.

It's been a really good team to work with. Special teams each and every season you know there are going to be challenges, things that are going to happen. You don't know what they are. You don't know what the challenges are going to be. Injuries, whatever it may be, but these guys have responded in a real admirable way each and every turn. That to me is how you evaluate a team.

We're just happy about that. Obviously excited about this opportunity. We've had our work cut out for us, so we're looking forward to that.

Then least at least for our local media I want to appreciate you guys being here and your coverage during the course. I know our fans really appreciate that.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Kirk, with Logan out, assuming Tyler Elsbury goes in there, what's the benefit of having a fifth year senior like that that can you plug in there like Nick DeJong did at the end?

KIRK FERENTZ: You just stole my answer right there. I just talked about Kyler Fisher, a fifth year senior. Last year Tyler stood in there I think for four games when Logan missed. He got injured and had to come out. Els did a great job, really good job. That is a real benefit. It's a luxury item, quite frankly, to have him available. Nick DeJong did a great job when Dunk was out, and we didn't miss a beat.

It's hard to replace a guy like Logan. Logan is not only a really good football player, team leader, he will be on the sideline tomorrow and can't go, unfortunately.

Tyler will do a good job. Great opportunity for him. I know he's excited about it.

Q. With Kyler's unmet eligibility requirement, at what point did you find that out? I assume probably Jaxon Rexroth will be filling in in that lead-off spot unless you have something else planned?

KIRK FERENTZ: Was your first question when we found out?

Q. Yeah, what was the timeline?

KIRK FERENTZ: We saw it coming maybe a couple of weeks ago. Somewhere in December. He made every effort to make it to the finish line, but just wasn't able to. It's unfortunate.

I've got a son who graduated -- I have three sons that have graduated from Iowa, and one, I remember in May, just asking distinctly, You sure you got this thing measured up because I was just watching what he was doing, and I wasn't quite sure. He made it maybe by that much. The irony here is Tyler is a graduate. That's just part of the deal.

It's a tough break. Nothing malicious, anything like that. He's the one that's hurting him more than anybody, but we'll be fine. Rexroth will be out there, and we'll be fine.

Q. I want to ask about a former player. Yesterday Marshal Yanda was named one of the 15 finalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame. If he gets nominated and he is in there, he would be your first former player to be a Pro Football Hall of Famer. Tell me about maybe a memory of Marshal and what he means to you, what that would mean to have him in the pro football Hall of Fame?

KIRK FERENTZ: I've got a million memories. Somebody told me last night that would be the first one, which I hadn't really thought about. First of all, when they start out with that initial list, I look at it every year, there's not anybody on there that's not a great player.

So I don't think the average person, average fan really appreciates how tough it is to make any Hall of Fame whether you are talking about the College Football Hall of Fame or you talk about the NFL Hall of Fame because there are so many really good players that aren't in it.

So for him to make that final cut, I think it's 15, that's unreal. It's even more impressive because of the position he plays. It's kind of an underappreciated, devalued position, if you will, although there are a couple of guys that have already gone in. Russ Grimm, who I was with in 1980, one of the best players I've ever been around. I think left guard from LSU for the Steelers, Alan Faneca, is

also in.

I think it's really tough for a guard, but it speaks to Marshal. My first memory of him is, Boy, we made him a mistake. Recruited him out of junior college. He recruited us, quite frankly. Got here in January midyear. I watched him in the out-of-season program. I thought, Oh, boy, this might not have been a good decision. Wasn't the prettiest car on the lot.

It wasn't until we started practicing in pads, real football, all of a sudden I said, Okay, went from being a redshirt pocket to maybe our best lineman. That would have been spring of '06, I think.

Better than the way he plays is his attitude. He's absolutely unbelievable. He was our honorary captain for the Wisconsin game, and his message was one probably every human being should hear but certainly every athlete should hear. That's who he is. He realizes failure is part of improvement and growth. He's fully appreciative of that. He's battled through a lot of things, whether it was setbacks on the field, injuries. But his attitude is just so strong and powerful. That's the beauty of him.

He and his wife, Shannon, are raising three young kids right there near Iowa City, about 25 minutes away. It's really fun to watch. Really fun to watch. We just keep our fingers crossed and wish him all the best with the selection.

Q. It's obviously no secret, you guys brought in Hank brown, you're potentially looking for another quarterback in the portal. How have you seen Brendon Sullivan embrace that competition, embrace a change to showcase what he can do now that he is fully healthy? How have you seen him attack it?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's attacked everything since he showed up in June. I think that's maybe one of the most impressive things he's done. He got here late -- it's late in the game to get here in June and miss spring practice, but he works through everything diligently, physically, mentally. He's a sharp guy. He was a graduate when he got here.

So it's not an issue. His want to and will power, they're really impressive. I think he's his own worst enemy at times because he tries so hard and competes so hard, so we have to get him to play calm a little bit. Each and every step has been so important for him, and the good news is he's been pretty much healthy since we got going a couple of weeks ago.

I think we watched him the first couple of practices, but other than that, he's been full speed and had a really good morning this morning, so that's encouraging. He has to go

out and play.

It's like every position, but quarterback it's easier to say it than do it. He doesn't need to win the game. He needs to play his position and play it well and let the team help out to do their part, and that's everybody's job. He does a really nice job. Really pleased with where he is heading.

Q. Kaden Wetjen said the other day he is still not on scholarship. I was curious --

KIRK FERENTZ: He is or isn't?

Q. He said he isn't.

KIRK FERENTZ: We're still contemplating that, but yeah. No, I'm joking.

Q. How do you see the offense being different without Kaleb Johnson in this game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I mean, it's obvious. He's one of our best football players. If you would have asked the same thing in '08 when Shonn Greene was playing, you're going to be different with him not being in there.

We've had guys historically step up, and that's what we're counting on here. I'll go back to Jermelle Lewis stepping in when Fred Russell might have been out. I'm going way, way back. Look that one up in the archives.

Thinking about last time we played Missouri, we had a freshman running back running for 219. I did look that up to make sure I had my facts straight. That's the great thing about bowl games, the great thing about football. Everybody has an opportunity, and we have a couple of guys between Kamari and Jaz, who are eager to have that opportunity.

For any of us to think they're going to be Kaleb, that would be mistaken on our part. They don't have to be. They just have to be themselves because they're both good players. We have a couple of other guys too that may end up in there. We'll see how that goes. I would be perfectly happy if the two of them could split the load.

If we are going to win the game, we're going to have to run the ball a little bit. They know that. We know that. We have to find a way to do that. Obviously we're going to run it and we're going to have to throw it. This is not rocket science, but that's the key.

I'm confident those guys will do a good job. They've been really pretty much on task. I've talked about Kaleb a lot this year, and I could say the same thing about both of

those guys. They're different players than Kaleb, but they've been totally focused and had a good chemistry, the three of them, and now three is two, so here we go.

It's only 60-some plays, so not that big of deal. John McKay said, The ball is not that heavy. So here we go.

Q. Just feels like every year the vast majority of your guys really look forward to playing in the bowl game. You don't see very many opt-outs. Two years ago Jack Campbell, Sam LaPorta, Riley Moss, all those guys decided to play, and this year, same case. Why do you think your players continue to make this choice because there is the inherent risk of playing in a game obviously, but why do they continue to make the choice to suit up?

KIRK FERENTZ: I remember in college one of the best players on our team finished his career and blew an ACL crossing the street. Literally misstepped on a curb and ended up playing for the Jets for a little bit. So in my four years that was the only guy, for the record, that went on to the National Football League. We didn't have a lot of abundance of players, and I would be the showcase of that.

I think our guys play for the right reason. The good of the game is just a chance to be together and go out and compete together and go through the work leading up to competition. I think that's the big -- if you don't like that part in football, you are probably in the wrong sport because for baseball 162 games, basketball 80-plus, so you are playing a lot more than you're practicing or working.

So that's kind of the nature of football, and I think the nature of being part of a team, all those kinds of things, talk to any former player, the good ones, that's what they miss. That's what you miss when you are done playing. I think we've been very fortunate. We've had a lot of really good young guys in this program. A bunch of them on this team too, same way.

Q. I know you mentioned seeing some of the young guys go through the bowl prep and see who is standing out, see who is progressing. Any names come to mind?

KIRK FERENTZ: You don't want me to share those, do you? It's funny. In fact, I was walking in. We had an event last night, a bowl event, which I'll put a plug in. The TransPerfect Music Bowl, we get to go to the Opryland. This is unsolicited. It is easily the best bowl event. I've been to a few bowls. I think 30. I counted it somewhere this week. 30 in my career.

It's easily the best event for head coaches to go to. I haven't been a head coach 30 times. It's just a really neat thing. So how I got on that?

Coming out of that event, one of my friends, a guy I used to teach cool ask with a hundred years ago, and we are walking down the hall and we walked one of our younger players, a freshman. Just said, This guy might be one of those guys. I'll let you guys figure that out somewhere next fall. I hope I'm right. We'll see.

It's been fun to watch the guys work. There's good and there's bad. You watch the guys work that maybe have been on the scout team. You don't get to watch every day doing what we do. That's kind of fun and exciting. Then there's some anxiety too where you are looking at some guys that are going to have to replace some of the seniors we're losing, and you're, like, Oh, boy, I don't know if this guy -- name a guy, Jay Higgins or Mason Richman.

We still have until next September to get those guys ready, but just in general, the guys work with a good attitude. They've been out there trying to get better, and they have been getting better. When you are too close to it and seeing it every day, not every day, but you are seeing it day after day, it's like anything. It's like your own kids. Then when you are gone for a week and come back, it seems like they grew an inch or two.

So, anyway, it's interesting, but we'll see what spring ball brings. More commentary maybe at the end of spring. We'll see what it looks like. Hopefully guys will keep growing.

Thanks very much.

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