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Iowa Football Coordinators Press Conference**

**Special Teams Coordinator LeVar Woods**



**Q. Obviously one of the big stories so far has been the performance of Tory Taylor. From his coach's standpoint, what have you seen and maybe are you a little surprised by Howie effect I have he's been and made this seamless transition to football?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, he's certainly been a great addition to the team, great addition to the specialist room. Definitely not surprised by him. He's an incredibly talented kid, incredibly conscientious young man. Shouldn't call him a kid because he's not a kid. However, I think everyone has been excited by him and certainly looking forward to seeing how he progresses moving forward. But he's been effective for us in helping change and flip field position and helping pin the opponents inside the 20-yard line, inside the 10 at

times, and it's been fun to watch him, watch his maturation. I think the sky's the limit for him, and definitely glad he's here.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about one of your special teams demons I guess it is in Terry Roberts. One guy he kind of reminds me of a little bit in that position is Sean Prater from way back when. What's the impact he makes**

**there and do you see just almost the desire to compete at that position that makes him so effective in some ways?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, I think Terry has been a pleasant surprise. Shouldn't say surprise, either, because he has worked very hard to put himself in the position where he's at. There's plenty of things he's done exceptionally well on the field and there's a lot that he needs to improve upon, as well, before he becomes a complete player on special teams or defense. But certainly happy with the trajectory that he's taken right now and the way he's been working, and he's been fun to watch.

Just a little bit about Terry, I think everyone has seen he's incredibly fast. He does have a desire to compete, and I think on game days you certainly see that, and I know he's certainly a welcome friend for Tory. Been punting the ball because Tory has been excited to have him down there, and also I think for Caleb in kicking off and seeing some of the coverage things he's been able to do in kickoff coverage, it's been fun watching Terry not only mature as a player but also as a person. I think another guy the sky's the limit for him if he really sticks to it and keeps working hard.

**Q. Charlie Jones, did you see this kind of coming, or has it even surprised you what he's been able to do?**

LEVAR WOODS: I'm not sure anyone really saw this happening for Charlie. Charlie is again another guy off to a great start. A younger player as we look at it, sort of unheralded a little bit, for us kind of unknown, as well. I think one thing you can say about Charlie is since the day he got here a year ago, just kind of watching him and seeing how he works and goes about his business, the guy puts in a ton of work every day and it's been fun seeing all that work and all that time and effort he's put in starting to pay off.

I think, again, a guy that's got a very bright future and a guy that has really helped this football team, not only on the football field but also just kind of his mindset and the way he approaches every day and the way he works. The guy is here all the time, all day. I'll walk by, go down to someone's office or something and look out on the football field through the in door and the guy is out there catching balls off the JUGS machine at like 3:00 in the afternoon, well after practice. He and Nico Ragaini have developed a great relationship in that regard, and I think it's paying off for him. That is something, like I said, started a year ago for the guy. I think he has a clear vision of what he wants to be and what he wants to do while he's here at Iowa, and the guy has put in the time and it's fun seeing it pay off for him.

Another guy who I think the future is very bright for if he keeps working the way that he's working and the contributions he's making to this football team and just an early start I think are going to be fairly significant already and I think are going to be even more significant moving forward.

**Q. I apologize if you've gone over this already, but could you detail the recruitment of Tory and your trip to Australia, how much time that took and what it was like for you?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, it was certainly an interesting experience unlike any other recruiting trip I've ever been on. I've been kind of all over different corners of this country looking at players at different positions and whatnot, but certainly have not crossed the borders or crossed the ocean into Australia. That was definitely a

unique experience and just one, I've never been to Australia, although I do have a daughter named Sydney who was named Sydney because my wife and I were planning to go take a trip to Australia back when we found out my wife was pregnant with our daughter back in 2004 or 2003 she was pregnant with her.

But having a chance to go over there and see Tory and see how he lives and see how he operates and see the way that he has trained was exceptional for me. It's definitely eye opening. It's a different type of punter over there, a different type of training than we have seen here in America, and I think we're all starting to see that with Tory and kind of what his abilities and what he's able to do.

Tory is still fairly new to punting, which is exciting as a coach because you see there's so much potential in the guy, not only on the football field but also as a person, as a young man. The sky's the limit for that guy. I know I've been repeating that, but I think it's the truth for all these guys we're talking about. I think there's a lot out there for him.

Getting a chance to see how Tory lives and how he was raised and brought up; there was really no mystery to the early success he's had, and there's going to be continued success for him, as well, if he stays on the right track. Great family. Mom and dad have done a great job with him. He's one of four brothers. I think over the years as you guys get a chance to know him and talk to him, he's a very reserved guy, really quiet, doesn't like to talk about himself. But I think the more you dig and the further you get with him, you'll realize what an interesting young man he is.

**Q. How long a trip was that for you from the moment you left home until you got back, and what was it that made you want to go there all those years ago?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, it was too long. Too long to be honest with you, but it was well worth the trip. I think one way was 26 hours to get over there. If you're counting actual hours. The longest flight was from San Francisco to Melbourne, and that was 15-16 hours in a middle seat in coach. It's a long way to be sitting still in one spot.

But well worth it once we got there, and then the same trip on the way back we flew from Melbourne to Sydney and Sydney to Dallas on the way back. I had came back, actually timed it up, I had planned on recruiting in Texas for a day but our flight got delayed, but I had flown in there to be there for Hayden Fry's memorial in Dallas and meet Coach Ferentz and a lot of the guys on the staff that were there and former teammates. So that sort of worked out that way.

But the other thing like getting over there, the guys he works with, the guys he trains with, there's a couple of guys in a group called Pro Kick Australia, guys that have a lot of ability and a lot of intel and understanding what they're doing with the football. It's a different style over there, and they've been teaching these guys for a long time, and Tory is a one of the guys that's been in that program and had success. There's Michael Sleep-Dalton that we had the year previous. He was sort of the lead-in to that for us, and Michael came here and did well, so we felt confident going over there to see Tory.

**Q. I have two questions about fakes. The one against Michigan State, would that have worked if they hadn't called time out?**

LEVAR WOODS: They all work. They all work or I wouldn't call them (laughter).

**Q. I had a philosophical question for you. Do you go into each game with one fake idea, five fake ideas? How is the procedure to actually getting it on the field?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, it's a good question. Typically for us we would go into the game with a couple or a handful of fakes that we like, that we've seen, that we've practiced, and how do they match up with the opponent that we're getting ready to face, and then also there are some opponents we face or some games where we feel like we can take advantage of and so we try to do that and try to be aggressive.

It also ties in with the play calling on offense and defense and sort of the situation that we're in.

Obviously Coach Ferentz is the one that makes those final calls, and I'm just the guy that tries to put it together and give him some ideas and thoughts, but ultimately it comes down to what's best for the team and can we help our football team either extend a drive or score points or whatever it is we're asked to do at that moment.

That's what we're trying to do, and that's all we're thinking about when we have fakes.

Again, one of the things with fakes, you're never quite sure is it really going to work, are they really going to respond the way that you think. But I think one of those things, you have to have confidence in what you're doing and what you've seen and there's a lot of study that goes into it before we actually call it on the football field, but it's something that we've been thinking about for a long time and working on.

I like to coach it. I don't like you making me talk about it and giving up some secrets.

**Q. Going back to Tory Taylor, it really is kind of a marvel watching what he's done. As you mentioned he's so new to punting, 23-year-old freshman, had never been inside of an American football stadium until the season opener against Purdue. How did you go about giving him advice going into that game and what were those conversations like? How do you give a player who's never stepped inside an American football stadium advice?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, so it was a little bit eye-opening on traveling to Purdue, right. So we get there in West Lafayette and we're driving on the bus there and we finally get to have a position meeting and actually having a meal with our specialists like we typically do on a Friday night, and I asked Tory, what did you think or what do you think about being here, and he says, "Coach, is this what it's like everywhere in America?" I said, "What do you mean." He goes, "Well, I've only ever been to Iowa City or to West Lafayette." It's the second city he's been in besides the airports he's flown through to get here. So that was very eye-opening for me. I hadn't even thought about that, so he hadn't really been outside of Iowa City.

So everything is brand new to him, and I think to your point about playing in his first game, it was definitely something he hadn't done before, but some of the conversations he and I had were more about just trying to calm some of his nerves,

and I'd ask him what is he most anxious about, how can I help, what are the things that can calm him down, and ultimately the advice to him was he doesn't need to be anything other than himself, and don't try to do too much, don't try to be someone you're not, don't try to pinpoint this or do that, just be you, and that's what he's been doing so far and he's been excellent at it so far.

Happy with the progress he's made. Again, there's plenty more out there for him as there are a bunch of guys on the team. We're just trying to get better every week and he's certainly one of those guys that I think is improving with every opportunity he gets.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about Tory Taylor. Did you always feel like he was your guy, that he was definitely going to be coming to Iowa? Or was there real competition for him coming from Australia?**

LEVAR WOODS: I felt good about Tory from the first time I spoke with him on the phone and FaceTimed with him. I certainly watched his workouts from afar virtually, which everyone is doing in recruiting. They're all doing Zoom meetings and FaceTime workouts and all that kind of stuff. So we were ahead of the game with that in recruiting Tory.

But think back, this was almost, shoot, a year ago now or maybe a little bit before. I think it was October was when we first kind of got connected with Tory and first got a chance to really see him and he was still developing at the time and still figuring some things out and then finally made the decision that that was our guy and made a chance to go over there and see him and confirm it.

I've always felt good about Tory since the first conversation, again, back in I want to say October. I don't remember exactly. But definitely felt good about him and still feel good about him now.

**Q. Keith Duncan expressed a little disappointment in his last couple field goal tries. When you've got a guy who's been as consistent as he's been over time, what's the key to avoid having him make that into more than it needs to be?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, he is a veteran guy, an older and experienced guy. We've all seen him for a long time and seen his successes. I think Keith is one of the ultimate competitors, both he and Caleb Shudak together I think are incredible competitors, and I think that's one of the things that helps set them apart and set Keith apart, as well.

I think that's where the frustration may come in for him, when the results aren't desired, and I think for him it's more just about going back to the basics and going back to, hey, what works, what doesn't, taking inventory, seeing what did you think about this, are there technical issues or is it more just, hey, I happen to read the wind incorrectly on this place or hey, I didn't quite hit the ball the way I wanted to. I think Keith is in a good place. I feel good about where he's at, and I think we've all seen Keith and seen him in some of his finest moments, and again, he's a senior but he definitely has more room to grow, which is exciting.

Anyway, Keith is on his way, and certainly he's disappointed whenever he misses kicks because he cares and because he's a competitor. But happy with him, happy with Caleb. I think I'd also throw in Austin Spiewak and Ryan Gersonde. I think those are four older guys that the leadership from those guys for not only our

position room but also within special teams has all been exceptional. They're all operating at a high level and excited about where they're at and where they're taking this group.

**Q. Recruiting never stops, except for dead periods which are now it seems like - in person anyway - for over a year. How is that impacting you because I know you're still having to do the Zoom stuff, but is it difficult or more frustrating than ever because you don't get a chance to evaluate some of these people face to face?**

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, it's frustrating. I think coaches, players, young recruits, high school coaches, parents. It's very frustrating because, as you know Iowa and you know our program, we're methodical in what we do. It's not just, hey, he looks good on tape or he checks these boxes and we offer guys. It's more we need to see him. We need to be around him, we need to talk to the high school coach, talk to his high school basketball coach, talk to his eighth grade girlfriend, talk to the janitor, talk to everybody to get a feel for who the person really is because that's important for us here, and that's what we're unable to do right now. Some of it is recruiting by blind faith, which is not the most fun thing to do right now, but it's part of the nature of the beast, sort of like we talked about the initial FaceTime recruiting with Tory Taylor back in October a year ago. I had no idea that that was going to be how recruiting was going to be moving forward here in 2020 and 2021, but it is what it is and we've got to manage it and deal with it and keep pushing forward.

The one thing, too, to close up with that, when you talk about this football team, you talk about the guys that we get a chance to work with on a daily basis, this team is full of great young men. We talked about a few of them that you guys have asked about but there's a bunch of others out there, too, that come every day and they work really hard and they put in the time, and it's fun seeing some of the young guys kind of mature and come to the point where they're going to be exceptional football players on offense or defense and then contributing to this team the best way that they see fit.

Some of those guys, just to highlight Ivory Kelly-Martin and Mekhi Sargent, two guys that are veteran running backs for us that have really put in the time and helped out on special teams and contributed to this football team, a guy like Henry Marchese, guys that have been here for a while and put in the time, he and Julius Brents, two guys that are really helping push this thing forward for us. And Turner Pallissard and Monte Pottebaum were just getting a taste of those two guys. Some young guys that people haven't even heard of until the last week or two with Kyler Fisher and Mike Timm, some guys that I think are the future of this program, particularly in special teams and guys that we get a chance to work with every day, so it's a lot of fun.

## Offensive Coordinator Brian Ferentz



**Q. Describe a little bit of the running game, how that's sort of progressed so far this season. It seems like the offensive line has been consistent, Tyler Goodson, Mekhi Sargent, Ivory Kelly-Martin have all done their thing. How would you assess the running game halfway through the season?**

**BRIAN FERENTZ:** Yeah, we're pleased with the running game. I feel like everything starts and ends with our ability to run the football and establish the run game. You look at the last two victories, we were certainly able to do that. You look at the games we lost, I thought we ran the ball pretty well at Purdue. Didn't run it quite as well against Northwestern and certainly that hurt us.

But I think you bring up an interesting point when you talk about why has it been successful. You mentioned the offensive line. I feel like they've been playing pretty well and certainly played at a high level last week. You mentioned three backs also playing at a really high level. But one thing it's important to think about when you talk about the run game, it's always a team effort. I've been around a lot of really good offensive lines where we weren't doing much but averaging about four yards a carry, which isn't enough because when you talk about how do you have that success running the football, obviously the line has to do a great job to get it started. Backs have to do a good job.

But when you think about team football, we've got nine guys on every play that we're capable of blocking unless you're talking about wildcat or quarterback run game, right. So one guy is handing the ball off, one guy is carrying it. Only nine guys can block, which means there's going to be two free guys on defense, and the goal on every play is to put the ball in the least dangerous unblocked player that we can. Hopefully there's one guy way on the backside of the play and then hopefully the guy on the front side that we can't get blocked is the least dangerous, the secondary support player.

But that's going to take the tight ends, the fullbacks and then most importantly the perimeter players, and when you look at the success we were able to have Friday night, certainly the line played well. Certainly the backs ran the ball well and were seeing things. Tight ends I thought played well.

But probably underappreciated was the value of the receivers in the run game last week, finishing blocks, starting blocks, sustaining blocks, and if you look at any of

the big explosive runs from last week or the season, chances are you're going to see a couple receivers in that picture allowing us to go from 14 yards to 46 yards or 12 yards to 25 or whatever it is.

Certainly those things are important in the game.

**Q. You mentioned the receivers. Brandon Smith was pretty important, I thought, across the board in the running game even when he didn't get any targets. How do you feel he is right now within the entire offense, and do you expect him to get more targets going forward?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, we'd certainly like to get everybody involved, whether it's Brandon, Ihmir, Tyrone, or Nico on the outside. You have four guys right there that you certainly want to have the ball, then you have three good running backs that you want to have the ball and then you've got tight ends that you want to get involved, as well.

Certainly you want to get everyone involved. I think Brandon, what you've seen through the first four weeks is just his value in our offense. He's come up with a couple key conversions on 3rd down. He's done a nice job single width into the boundary when we have that match-up. And then last week as you alluded to, certainly no targets in the throw game, but if you look at what he did in the run game, he had as big an impact on that game as he's had all year. Certainly want to get the ball in his hands a little bit more.

But football is an interesting game; you never know how it's going to go. Going into the game Friday night, the way we had game planned, certainly we wanted to put the ball in the air a little bit. I have to be honest, I didn't expect to run it as effectively as we ended up running the ball. So that changes the game as the game goes on, right.

You want to make sure that you're not making things too complicated or reinvent the wheel. The way that game went, the way the weather was, our ability to run the football made it pretty easy to just keep going back to that well, but that's not going to be the case every week, and certainly Saturday in State College we're going to be presented with a whole new challenge, and at some point during the year everyone is going to be called upon to pull their weight, make those plays as far as targets go.

I fully anticipate him getting the ball a little bit more as we move forward here, but you never know how those games are going to turn out.

**Q. As you know, the backup quarterback is one play away from being called on. We haven't seen a lot of Alex Padilla. Would there be a major dropoff if he had to come in, the state of his progress? And then as you might imagine, a lot of fans ask us about Deuce Hogan. We haven't seen a look of him so maybe you can give us a progress report on what he's doing behind the scenes.**

BRIAN FERENTZ: I'd start with Spencer because I think Spencer, his progress is indicative of Alex's progress is indicative of Deuce's progress from this standpoint. It's been a unique year, obviously, and it continues to get a little bit more unique by the week.

But I know we've talked about it in the past, when you look at the calendar year, right, so you lose all of spring ball, you lose 15 practices. You lose a lot of time in

the weight room from the course of May to late July going into August. You lose all that time but also in that time you lose in the weight room, you lose a lot of time on the field doing skills and drills, working on routes on air, 7-on-7, all the things that go into the skill development that the quarterback, receiver, tight end, running back, anybody who's touching the ball, those skill positions.

When you lose all that time, unfortunately you don't get it back. I'll tell you, I think it's difficult to become a great quarterback on Zoom. I think Zoom is important. It's allowed us to communicate here today, whatever video service we're using. But you can't become a great football player. You can't become a great quarterback certainly on Zoom. You can get better, and those guys that we're talking about right now all got better during that period, which is a testament to their work ethic, a testament to their commitment to being good football players.

But the reality is without being out on the field and throwing and catching that ball, you're losing time in that skill development.

Now, the only thing you can do is try to make up for lost time once you get going again, which for us was briefly in August and then again really in late September and October.

What I've tried to do and what we're all trying to do as a staff is look at our progress and try to be realistic about our expectations and what we're trying to get done as we progress through this period.

I think Spencer has done a tremendous job of growing and maturing and becoming a better player regardless of those circumstances, but you can't ignore the detriment that the lack of time is going to have on your development, and then I would say the same for Alex. Been very pleased with his development and the things he's done. But like a lot of guys, giving them these reps for the first time in the last couple months has been really good, but you're starting behind the 8-ball a little bit, and same thing with Deuce. Unfortunately for Deuce, he wasn't even here in the spring. He had no basis. His first opportunity to really go out and practice with our football program was briefly in August and then mostly in September.

Those are all the things you're trying to deal with in this period, and all three of those guys have handled it well.

**Q. A couple games ago you had to make some changes along the offensive line due to injury, illness, and the offensive line has taken off a little bit. Are you tempted to if it ain't broke don't fix it and ride this for a while or will those guys get back in there?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, shoot, we'd like to have everybody available. If you look at us the first couple weeks we were rolling guys through anyway. The six guys that are playing now, they were playing early in the year. We were looking at more of an eight-man rotation. Certainly that rotation has been slowed down a little bit without Coy and without Kyler but we're looking forward to getting those guys back, getting them healthy. Like we always do, we're going to try to get the best guys on the field. That's our goal, whether it's match-up related, whether it's health related, whatever it is. But very pleased with the guys that have been out there and really felt like we were making strides those first two weeks, too.

I'd go back to my previous answer, the question about the quarterbacks. It's true of any position group, and if you want to get specific with the offensive line or the

tight ends, the guys involved in that core blocking, another learned skill. It's skill development is a little bit underrated these days, but when you talk about blocking, that's about one of the hardest skills that you can try to develop in a football player. It's not an easy thing to do to move another human being against their will, and it takes reps, it takes time, it takes repetition, and then when you combine that with the fact that you're going to ask five, six, seven guys to work together on every snap, it gets even more complicated.

Just feel like the guys have done a good job of taking advantage of the practice time. A lot of times you get in the season you've had a bunch of practice time so that it becomes a little bit more about polishing or putting the final touches on the game plan, matching up against the opponent.

This year we've had to try to keep the emphasis on skill development as we moved into the regular season, and I think they've done a hell of a job as far as going to work every day and trying to get better, and now I hope we're starting to see the results on the field. But I'm also a realist and I've had enough experience to know that you've never arrived -- you're as good as your last game, and right now it's pretty good up front. But we've got a pretty stiff challenge ahead of us on Saturday in State College.

We need to take the next step.

**Q. I'm just wondering from last year to this year, has the way in which you call or manage a game on offense changed at all with obviously Spencer taking over at quarterback and Tyler Goodson at running back with another year under his belt?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: That's a good question. I hope so. I hope the way I've managed or called a game has changed every year. I've tried to evolve within the role and tried to get better at my job. I know the results are probably always debatable, but I assure you that my emphasis is on growth. If we're going to ask the players to get better and improve then that's something I want to do as a play caller.

With Spencer, I don't know that it's changed that much. As far as what we're asking him to do in the run game, what we're asking him to do in protections and just with the plan, not a drastic drop-off or difference from what we asked Nate to do a year ago. So certainly haven't changed in that regard.

But whether it's Tyler or the other two backs, I think we've tried to be cognizant of the fact that we have good guys in the backfield, and we want to make sure we get them involved. Sometimes that means maybe having one or more of them in the game at the same time. I think we've had a couple snaps where we have a least two of those guys out there, certainly have Tyler taking the snap from time to time, it's a little different. And trying to evolve within that package, as well, as we move forward to see if we can grow a little bit there.

But as far as managing the game or calling the game, I think it's different because I'd like to hope that I'm getting better at it or getting a better feel for it. One thing that we've talked about a lot in the off-season and one thing that I've been very pleased with through the first four weeks is just the tempo of which we're playing. We're not a tempo outfit. We're not a hurry-up outfit. We like to huddle, we like to change personnel, but that doesn't mean we have to play slow, and we're not trying to slog through the game. We want to make sure we're getting snaps and getting

plays run and trying to push that tempo in and out of the huddle, changing personnel, getting people on and off the field and still trying to put pressure on the defense in that regard.

I've actually been very pleased with how Spencer has managed the huddle, gotten us in and out of that thing and gotten the play called and gotten us to the line of scrimmage in a timely fashion.

**Q. Two years ago when we were at the Outback Bowl you said you felt like Jimmy Johnson with that great train robbery of getting rid of Herschel Walker and kind of compared that with getting Tyler Linderbaum on offense and to my novice eyes it seemed to be what Jimmy Johnson did almost with a Super Bowl type of player. How good is he? How has he performed, and in space he seems to have very few peers. What's kind of been your assessment of Tyler midway through his sophomore year as a center?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: I don't remember that comparison, but I look smart now so I'll let you give me credit for it. Tyler is playing at a really high level. If I had to single two guys out up front right now, Tyler is playing at an extremely high level and so is Alaric. Those two guys are really setting the tempo for us up front and some other guys aren't too far behind. I think Cody Ince is a guy that if we keep him healthy, he's just going to continue to grow. Cole Banwart is playing his best football of his career. Mark Kallenberger is another guy that since the bowl game has continued to grow and continued to mature and take on a bigger role, and then Justin Britt played his best football Friday night of his career. If we can get Kyler back and Coy back I feel confident those guys will continue to grow, as well.

On the offensive line everything is going to start at the center position. The guy is going to be your tone setter, going to be your tempo setter, and he's going to be your bellcow. Going back to my last answer, talking about getting guys in and out of the huddle, nobody can get to the ball faster than the center. He sets that tempo right from the start, and when you're talking about Tyler, yes, athletic, strong, has all those measurables that you're looking for, but the level he's competing at, his desire to compete and to line up and beat the person across from him, it's as high as I've been around. He's a pleasure to coach. He's a pleasure to be around. If we can steal some more guys like that from the defense, we'd certainly love to do it. Guys like him are few and far between.

Between him and AJ, our leadership up front, it's showing up. There's a great shot last week where those two guys end up leading the way to end up right out in front of the ball, finishing blocks into the sideline, and when you talk about bullying or being the bullies of the Big Ten or being the most physical team or any of this stuff that we've talked about in the past around here, right now those two guys are leading the charge.

**Q. How did the wildcat kind of come to fruition for you guys and do you like it?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, it looked pretty good when it scored. Yeah, I like it when it works. But I think the idea has just been trying to expand what we're doing. I think there's really two things about the wildcat that were intriguing to us. One was just snapping the ball to a guy that can run. Obviously you're eliminating part of the operation. It opened up to us some of the read game, the gap read stuff. Just felt

like that was a better guy doing it than the quarterbacks that have been on our roster, that are playing for us, not true runners.

So that was certainly part of the equation. And then the other part of the equation was we see a lot of defenses are going to defend formations. Forcing them to defend a formation, evening those numbers that I talked about earlier, run game, typically we can only block nine of 11. We feel like if we can get people to defend those formations, that's one less player to block. And we're just trying to even numbers out, create advantages for us in the run game, and so far we've been able to do that. But I do anticipate as we show more of it as it becomes a bigger part of the offense, certainly people are going to defend it and have creative ways to try to take those things away. So we need to continue to evolve there and make sure that we're staying ahead of the curve.

**Q. As a coach and as part of the coaching staff, what's been the hardest thing since the season began in regards to dealing with the COVID as sort of always in the front of your minds?**

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, that's an interesting -- it's been an interesting year as far as those things go on, and I think first of all, it's a very good question. I'll try to answer it as concisely as I can. You open up a can of worms.

Number one, I just feel fortunate to be standing here in front of you guys today. This world, things are certainly getting a little bit more serious here in the Midwest, and you worry every day just about the safety and the health of our community. You want to make sure we're doing the right things to protect people. And so that's always a concern.

But as long as they say that it's safe for us to play football and operate and do what we're doing, then you follow those guidelines and then you follow those protocols to the best of your ability and you try to take this as seriously as you can.

From a football standpoint, I referenced earlier the difficulties earlier in the year as far as not having a lot of the preparation time that you're accustomed to having. And as it's applied to the season, you wake up every day and you're really not sure what your roster may look like by the evening.

And that's challenging, but you know what, we're in the business of dealing with challenges. We're in the business of handling these things as they come up typically in the year you're going to have injuries, you're going to have guys get hurt, which we're still having. You need to adjust. You need to accommodate your plan for those things so that you can adjust if necessary.

And right now, it's just a different challenge. That's okay. Everybody is dealing with the same challenges. Everybody is playing by the same set of rules, and so what we're trying to do is just do it to the best of our ability every day, improve a little bit. Really the core messaging, the core belief structure doesn't change. But certainly the COVID protocols, the COVID restrictions, it forced us to be a little bit more creative or a little bit more open minded in our planning.

But I would just reiterate, again, what we're dealing with is really minor on the scale of things. We're fortunate to be doing what we do. We're fortunate to come in here every day with these players and have a chance to compete and do the things that we love to do. Not everyone has been that fortunate. Not everyone is that fortunate. I think the important thing right now for us as a coaching staff or for our

players is to be grateful and to be appreciative of the opportunity that we do have every day to do this because nothing is guaranteed.

We need to continue to do the best that we can to protect everyone in the community.

## Defensive Coordinator Phil Parker



**Q. Every year is a new challenge, you have people coming and going. This year in the back end you had to replace two guys who were on NFL rosters right now and having a very short window to try to put everything together. How much have they grown, first of all, over the last three weeks, and in what ways if they have?**

PHIL PARKER: Well, let's go back and start. I think we've gone back to August where these kids were just starting to get back into it and were going to have a season and the preparation, what they did there and what they were trying to do in the summer had a little bit of carryover. We had no spring ball so you really couldn't tell about all the kids that you had or

how they could have developed into where they're at now. The last three weeks I would say this: Our kids have been practicing really hard. Every kid is really into it. It's nice going to meetings. You can see the development, understanding the game of football and the tightness and tight knit group they are right now. Really pleased the way they've developed into playing consistent football. We've tried to eliminate the explosive plays. We probably don't have many explosive plays that we've been giving up but we have been giving up some big chunks at a time and I think we're trying to narrow that down, which I think guys are doing well. I think Merriweather has done a good job at safety along with Belton. They both have been playing in there, and Belton has also played back in the backside as a strong safety. But then Jack Koerner is a guy who keeps on developing, keeps on improving every week. He's taking more of a command back there. That's what you need back there as a safety. You need to know what's going on just as well as a coach does.

And then obviously Matt Hankins, really up and beyond what I thought he would be at this time. He has been such a great leader to all the guys not only in the secondary but I think the team. And I think the development he's had just watching him practice and competing every day whether it's in the special teams aspect of it, maybe he's not even on the first team or second team special teams, but when we go down and work the other side, he's working his best on working on releases. So I just see the difference that he has there for the leadership that we need and continue to do that. So I'm very happy with what I've seen with Matt. Matt has been very, very good for us.

**Q. I wanted to ask about Jack Campbell and what he brings to this team and kind of what you saw from him in the game Friday and what we can expect from him moving forward.**

PHIL PARKER: Jack is a very special kid as far as person, great kid, nicest kid you want to be around outside the facility, but once he gets on that field, it just seems like he turns it up a little bit. Josey Jewell was very similar to that. I'm not saying that Jack is that, but I'm just saying Jack brings a little bit of energy, some toughness, old school maybe as far as I remember -- I remember I had a roommate Jim Morrissey. He reminds me of Jim Morrissey when I played at Michigan State. That's kind of who he reminds me of.

The only thing about the differences between those two kids is they're guys -- Jack probably weighs 30 more pounds than Jim Morrissey did.

But really like his intensity. The attitude that he brings, such a positive kid. I'm excited to see what he can really do.

**Q. The first couple weeks of the season maybe you guys didn't -- I don't want to say you guys played bad defensively, maybe not up to the level that you're used to. The last couple weeks you hold Michigan State and Minnesota both to seven points in each of those games. What big improvements from the first two weeks to the last two weeks really helped sell the defense into really starting to lock down and force more turnovers?**

PHIL PARKER: Well, I think it all starts with your preparation. Obviously we weren't happy the last two weeks giving up that many points, either, with seven apiece. One was on the second teamers but we expect them to be at a high standard, too.

But I think when I noticed it was after the Northwestern game. You could tell the difference in the practice tempo and the energy that was coming out to practice. I think the last three weeks we've been practicing at a high level, and I feel very confident in that the guys are going to go out and play hard. Might not play as clean -- we didn't play as clean in the first two games, but I think these guys are all set on going out and giving their best effort, and you see it in practice. You see it in meetings. To me that's part of the battle. Doesn't guarantee a win or anything like that, but our kids are invested and they're willing to keep on investing, and even if they don't know the outcome, all they know is they're going to invest of their time, their effort and prepare the best that they can and see what happens. And I think the guys have been doing it, and I think the team is actually getting closer and closer as we go.

**Q. You talked a little bit about the turnovers, the interceptions. I think it's 11 straight games for you guys. The amount you've had just going back three, four years, can you explain the volume and consistently being able to get interceptions?**

PHIL PARKER: I think it has probably a couple different things. We're mainly a zone type of match-up team that we are in the back end for many reasons. I like to have more zone eyes than man eyes, and what I mean by that, a lot of people that played man-to-man, it's very hard to get interceptions when you're playing so much man-to-man, and the way we've done it has been in a lot of quarters, a lot of quarter match, opportunities of guys the way they prepare, they study, they

understand the game, they understand the splits, they recognize formations. They understand tendencies.

It develops from guys preparing, but they're preparing -- some of the freshmen right now are preparing for their junior or senior year, and people don't understand -- it's not like you just go out there and say, hey, this is my first year, I picked up all this information and gathered it and everybody has an opportunity to go out there and play.

But what happens is you start seeing, recognizing things a lot easier the more film you watch, and then you start -- the more you focus in on the game plan during the week and understanding what somebody is doing to you, you start seeing things that it's hard to describe to just the average person as far as the preparation-wise. They see the games on Saturday, they don't understand how much knowledge or how much preparation that somebody has put into it, and the ability to see things and be able to make that decision, are you going to go for the pick, are you going to go for the interception -- go for the interception or are you going to go for the tackle.

I think our guys have been pretty good at matching routes. With a lot of zone eyes you have a lot more opportunities to catch interceptions and turnovers than you do in man coverage, strictly man.

**Q. On a side note, Jim Morrissey, is he the one who wore 51 for the Bears back in the '80s?**

PHIL PARKER: I think '84 was his last year at Michigan State. Yeah, he was 51 -- the first thing he said to me when he called me back, I'm probably going to get cut from the Bears because they gave me 51, but he ended up lasting about eight years, and finished his last two years, year and a half I think was with Green Bay. But yeah, very good player. Yep, that was him.

**Q. Kaevon Merriweather, an interesting background, basketball player, you obviously knew something or heard something about him. What did you hear when he was in high school, and what did you see, and then fitting in he had a really big stick in that first game against Purdue that really elevated him as a player or maybe it was the Northwestern game. What has he shown you in the last two games at strong safety?**

PHIL PARKER: Merriweather is a very smart kid. He's done a lot better job of preparation time, putting in and asking the right questions. You can tell when somebody is watching film when they come in and ask a question, hey, Coach, what are we going to do here and what are we going to do here if they do this. So you know he's been studying the game, not only -- on his own, and that's important.

I think the confidence level of going through the game, I think he's getting used to making the calls and being a dictator back there. You've got to make sure you're the one that's got to make the calls, you and Jack and everybody has got to be on the same page, and it makes you play faster.

I think he was very athletic in high school. Obviously I think before he transferred over to Belleville he was at Romulus, and I actually watched him in a workout, saw him, and then he ended up transferring at the end of the year, so he was at one school in the springtime and then in the summer he was actually Belleville. Really did a good job, really good kid, from a good family, and I'm happy where he's at.

He's not satisfied where he's at, either. He's looking to grow and improve his playing ability.

**Q. I actually wanted to ask about Penn State specifically. I know they've been a little bit of a source of frustration, 0 and 4 the last four years. What's the biggest challenge trying to stop a Penn State offense, especially with that dual-threat type quarterback?**

PHIL PARKER: Well, they always have good talent, but watching them, and if you never look at the scoreboard to see what's on the other side, these guys are very athletic, very similar system that they had before a new offensive coordinator came in. But they're still Penn State, and as far as that means they have their system. There's a little bit of tweaks into it. It's going to be a challenge for us. We're going to have to play clean football. We're going to have to be able to communicate and anticipate things before they happen. That's the only way you're going to beat these guys is understanding what you have to do and recognizing things before the play happens. And I think our guys have been doing a good job. I think the last three days have been really good of practice. We've got one more time, looking forward to the preparation. I really commend the players for how they're going about their business, and when it's time to go out there and practice they practice, and there's nothing wrong with having some fun, too. When they've got time to have fun, but when it's time to go and the play starts them guys are moving and I'm really excited to see what happens.

**Q. Who do you think is going to start at quarterback for them?**

PHIL PARKER: I'm sure either one is capable of doing it. 14, was it Clifford? I think it's -- he's won a lot of games last year, didn't he? I don't know, what was their record last year? I think they won a lot of games. So he's already been the starter for a lot of games. It's hard to say -- maybe he had a bad day or maybe something is wrong with him, who knows. But I think both guys are capable of running their offense to their ability and it's going to be a challenge for us to make sure that we can play our best. I just want to make sure that we give the best shot we have.

**Q. I think Riley Moss was the first guy that mentioned what you've been talking about, guys kind of changing the tempo in practice and flying around a little bit. Was there something said? Was the leadership group with the defense saying something that kind of said, hey, we've got to amp it up? Did you say something? How did this happen?**

PHIL PARKER: Well, you know, it's your job as a coach, you've got to make sure that what you're seeing on the film after the first and second game over there and evaluate your practices, everybody has different tempos. And on defense, we just thought that some guys needed it, and the guys that got to take control of that are the guys that are out there.

We can sit there and talk about it, but the one thing that I saw was the leadership between the linebacker group and the defensive backs with Matt Hankins and making sure that the growth was there, and then all of a sudden it took over from one position, the linebacker position, then it became contagious.

It's really been exciting. I think at all levels right now, everybody is holding everybody accountable for what they do on the field. If somebody is loafing on the field, the players will call them out. If somebody is not giving or finishing a play, the

players will call them out. The coaches don't even have to say a word. And that's the best thing about it.

I told somebody the other day, I was on the phone with somebody, and I said, I'm not coaching effort anymore. I don't have to coach it. You evaluate it, look at it. At least the last three days. It could change tomorrow, but I doubt it.

I think these guys have gotten a taste of what it is to prepare and how to do it and hold people accountable, and they're doing that, so it's self-imposed. I think they've done a great job. I can't be any happier in what I see with these guys right now.

**Q. I was wondering Tory Taylor has done a great job this year backing opposing offenses up inside the 20. How does that set the table for you guys on defense and what things have you been able to do when offenses have started in such bad field position?**

PHIL PARKER: Well, there's a couple times I think he's done a great job. For what he's done and accomplished so far this season for us. Obviously when you back somebody up inside the 10, the odds of them guys driving the ball and scoring is very, very low.

So we're very pleased to have that weapon. We're excited about that. Sometimes we're not always doing such a great job on defense. It's going to take them a little bit longer to score and take some time off the clock. You know, so that's a different way of trying to burn the clock. Trying to get less plays.

But anyway, I think it's been really tremendous. I think he's doing a good job. Knock on wood, to make sure he keeps on doing that, and I think he's been really good for our whole team.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about the impact Daviyon Nixon has had on the entire defense and especially the last couple weeks of Zach VanValkenburg?**

PHIL PARKER: Well, Daviyon Nixon, he's very athletic, very energetic. He's a guy that has a big motor that likes to go, and when he's going it's hard to block him, and he has that little bit of excitement to the things he keeps things fresh. It's kind of funny, we were going at it pretty good yesterday, and we hit the quarterback and put the quarterback out of -- our scout team quarterback. We only had maybe one or two plays left. I think it was one.

So it's funny, he jumped up as the quarterback and played the quarterback. For a 300-pound quarterback I thought it was pretty good that we let him do it because it was a pretty good throw downfield even though he threw an interception, but it was a nice spin on the ball and all that.

The energy that he brings I guess I'm saying, kind of bringing guys together, you've got to have fun, and I think they were having fun, but as a player he's a very impacted player for us obviously, and then Zach, he's done -- last week was awesome for him. I'm happy for him. He's a hard worker. He's grinding all the time. You know, that's a guy that's experienced. He's played the game for a lot of years in college and he's done a good job for us and we're happy that we have him.