

San Diego County Credit Union Holiday Bowl: Iowa vs USC

Friday, December 27, 2019

Kirk Ferentz

Iowa Hawkeyes

Iowa 49, USC 24

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, just a tremendous way to end the 2019 season for our football team. It was really a hard-fought game out there. Two highly competitive teams, two ranked teams. We got a lot of respect for USC, their program, their team certainly.

Just really proud of our team, the way they prepared, not only this week but also the entire month. That's always a challenge in bowl games. This one was a little bit unique for us because it was a shorter preparation with the calendar falling the way it did. I thought our guys really handled things well, did a great job out here. Obviously competed hard tonight. Just really, really proud of them.

The biggest thing for us tonight, it was a complete team victory. It was offense, special teams, defense. That's just good football. Somebody handed me on the way over here some stats that I think are pertinent:

12th year in a row we've had a defensive pick-six, defensive touchdown, off on interception. Happy about that. 49 points is the most we've ever had in a bowl game. A.J., back-to-back 10-sack seasons. Ihmir had a touchdown rushing, throwing, receiving and kick return, almost throwing. Then 47 wins over the last five years sets a school record.

Just really proud of our guys for that. A 10-3 season, certainly that is something to do in college football. Proud of our guys on that front.

Last, a couple thoughts. It's been a really challenging month in Iowa athletics with the passing of Bump and Coach Fry. When you think about both those men, what they stood for, what they taught was competing at a high level and doing it with great competitiveness but also with integrity. That's one of the reasons I'm so proud to be at Iowa. Hopefully this is one they both enjoyed tonight. More importantly their families enjoyed just as much. Just happy about that.

I think about our senior class this year, 19 guys,



majority of them didn't start actually. I can't say enough about the job they've done throughout their entire time in our program, whether it's five years, four years, some cases one year. Each and every one of them really did a great job modeling the right behavior, how to do things on a daily basis. The guys at the top have to set the tempo.

I can't thank them enough publicly. Just did it in the locker room. They're going to be Hawkeyes for life certainly. We're going to be with them all the way through. It's not a group I'm worried about too much down the road because they're great young people. Can't say enough about them.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. So much talk has been about Bump, Coach Fry. What was the emotion seeing the Hokey Pokey?

KIRK FERENTZ: Pretty special. Paulsen was right there leading. Imagine that?

I didn't queue them up on that one. Somebody else may have. Robin actually asked me about that 10 days ago, if that was going to happen. That was one of Coach Fry's signatures, one of many actually. Nice tribute to him.

Q. The significance of 10 wins. Seems like that's a pretty big deal.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's the ninth time in program history it's happened. It's something we put out there for our team, being ranked is a big thing, too.

Biggest thing when it all came down to it, encourage our guys to compete, let's go out and compete, try to enjoy the night. Last time together there. Are no tomorrows on this one. It's all about the 2019 season.

Winning 10 games is hard. Winning any game is hard in college football. I can't say enough about our entire football team. Again, it starts with those seniors. They can really feel proud about the contributions they've made here over the last four or five years.

Q. (Question about Ihmir and attacking the edges.)

KIRK FERENTZ: Seemed like there were some things we saw during the course of our preparation that we thought we might have a chance to get the ball on the

edge. He did a great job. Thought we had a really good game plan, executed it well.

Ihmir, really glad to see him play the way he did. He hasn't been full speed here the last couple weeks. Had a couple minor things going on. Came back the last week, couple days, practiced well, sure looked like he was full speed tonight. That was good to see.

Q. Coming into the week you were asked about the reputation of conferences in terms of team speed. How much of a role did your team speed on both sides of the ball play in this game?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know if we were better than them that way, but I think we were able to stay with them. I've been around the Big Ten for quite a while. There's been such a perception that gets a little distorted sometimes. It happens in sports all the time.

The conference stuff, things shift year to year, conference to conference. We had a really strong conference this year, I do know that. A lot of really good football teams. I think we're one of them. The way our guys competed week in, week out, just really proud of what they did.

To win 10 games in our conference, it's a conference where defenses tend to be pretty feisty and aggressive. To win 10 games the way we did, I'm proud of our guys overall.

Q. How big was the stop after the on-side kick?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really big. It's interesting, first half we took the ball, drove it, possessed it basically on every possession, came out with points. Had one long drive in that second half, as well.

But, yeah, you could feel momentum swinging. Definitely an opportunity for us. For us to come out and get a stop after we'd been struggling to get a stop. Really huge to flip it back. That could have gotten interesting real quick if they had taken the ball and gotten down there and scored.

Q. Talking about right after that stop, coming back with the physical drive. Seemed to be a gut punch to them.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's how football goes. It's back and forth, who can capitalize on opportunities. Certainly wasn't great field position for us. Guys took it and responded, much the way they did in the first half. Did open up the lead a little bit. It was really huge.

That's what I mean by good team football. A lot of good responses. You're going to have ups and downs during the course of a game. How we respond, whether it's on special teams, the kick return, certainly came at a big

moment. That drive you mentioned is really pivotal as well.

Q. Offensive coordinators are lightning rods for criticism.

KIRK FERENTZ: Really (laughter)?

Q. When you look at the first scripted series, 10 plays, five different personnel groupings, can you evaluate if this might have been Brian's best game as a play-caller?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's actually had a couple good ones. Ohio State comes to mind also.

It really gets down to, yeah, I think our coaching staff, our entire coaching staff, has really done a good job. I think that's been true all season long. They've done a great job of giving the players a good plan. Ultimately good, sound execution on the field. It's all about the players.

These guys have really been responsive, they practiced really well this week. We're not in the cozy confines of Iowa City. We're not able to set the times like we want. A couple bowl activities, which were great. The guys have been flexible, they handled it, a mature football team. I think the coaches on both sides of the ball gave these guys good plans, special teams on top of it. The guys executed it.

Really pleased with everything I saw tonight. We knew they were going to get some yards. We knew they were going to score. We wanted to limit that to field goals instead of touchdowns. A good night for us.

Q. Everybody talks about spreads in football. It still comes down to the line of scrimmage, doesn't it?

KIRK FERENTZ: It does. It sure helps.

Q. You were superior there.

KIRK FERENTZ: Again, I haven't seen the film to your point. I thought our guys played really well on both sides of the ball, up front. They present some challenges for you defensively with their blitzing, their attacking. They load that box up pretty heavy when we were in our run groups.

I thought our guys blocked well, protected well when we needed to. Missed one there at the end. That was more than the line. I thought our guys did a good job up front, got good pressure off the edges. Tough to get to the quarterback. I thought those guys worked hard. We were rotating everybody through. Really proud of their effort.

Q. A program that oftentimes doesn't get classified as very sexy. To get a sexy win with a named

program, what does that do for the program?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, our goal is to be bowl champions. Had a really tough opponent to play, a ranked team, a team that's very athletic, very well-coached, very explosive.

We had a lot of respect for them in all three segments. There's no downside to winning a game, no downside to that. It's great. To get our 10th win, to get it against a ranked opponent, get it on the road in a great bowl game.

Let me take one moment and compliment everybody associated with this bowl. The Holiday Bowl was great in the '80s. It's better now. Just the hospitality for our players. San Diego is such a great venue. Everything about it is good. Nothing that happened this week that we'd be upset about, that's for sure.

Q. You talk about the senior class, how this was the ultimate team victory. Devonte Young's block, is that what you mean?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you think about that. Devonte is a great story in himself. You think about guys like the Paulsens. Nobody was more into the game like Levi and Landan our sidelines. Week in, week out, those guys are selfless. That's how they are. They're that way every day at practice, every game.

It's easier to be a starter. Easier to be the guy out there playing all the time. We have so many guys that contribute on special teams, whatever. They're just good team guys. They do it in the weight room, in meeting rooms, all those kinds of things. That's what it takes to have a good football team.

I can't say enough about them, whether it's Stanley who is a marquee guy or a guy like John (indiscernible) who played on special teams but not an awful lot. All these guys are going to do a great job in life because they just know how to do things. That's ultimately the goal of this whole thing.

Q. You mentioned the total team win. When did it sink in when it's coming together?

KIRK FERENTZ: We always emphasize that, part of being a team win. Some days one of the segments doesn't have a good day or night, somebody else has to carry the load.

Tonight all three complemented each other in all three phases of it. It comes down to our players. I think they have an appreciation for what it takes to be a good football team. They go out and work towards that end. Simply gets down to the preparation part, then you got to show up and compete, whether it's 5:00, 1:00, 11:00. Our guys were whatever it is now 13-13. I'm just really proud of this whole group. They've been a fun

group to be with.

Thank you.

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Nate Stanley
Ihmir Smith-Marsette
A.J. Espenesa
Iowa Hawkeyes

Iowa 49, USC 24

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Ihmir, was the game plan for you to be that involved at every different level of the game?

IHMIR SMITH-MARSETTE: No, not particularly just me. We got a lot of plays set up for a lot of different people. The game plan was to go out there and attack early. Myself was in the game plan because we had plays scripted for everybody, I was just playing my game.

Nate did a great job of getting it out there for me, my blockers on kickoff return. I just did my job, played within myself, handled everything how I handled it.

Q. Nate, regarding his comments, can you elaborate more on how Ihmir was involved in the game plan, his performance.

NATE STANLEY: Yeah, we always have plays dialed up. In a media timeout, really before the game, we decided, one, that the pass he threw was going to be a call that we had up if we got in that situation. It's really just if those situations come up on whether those plays get called.

He got into a lot of those situations today. Like Ihmir said, there's a lot of plays scripted for specific people. Depending on the situations that come up, those plays get called. Ihmir got the lucky draw today, had a lot of those plays called for him.

Q. A.J., do you think USC respected or at least expected the team speed you guys had on both sides of the ball, given they're Pac-12, you are Big Ten?

A.J. ESPENESA: Yeah, I think so. I mean, those guys came out ready to play. They were attacking the line of scrimmage in the middle of the game. As the game



went on, you could tell we were starting to wear them out a little bit.

Those guys competed hard, played hard, they're a really good team. They're a name brand school, USC Trojans. To be able to come out and play like we did, to win the game, it's a good feeling.

I think they respected us so...

Q. (No microphone.)

A.J. ESPENESA: Foot speed?

Q. Yes.

A.J. ESPENESA: I think so. I mean, they have film of us going against good receivers. They have film of us going against good players. They know what we're capable of. I have no doubt they knew what they were in for.

Q. Nate, I believe you're the second Iowa quarterback to be 3-0 in bowl games. What does that mean for you?

NATE STANLEY: Extremely special, to be up there with Stanzi. Just goes to show the work that this team has put in. 3-0 in those bowl games wouldn't happen without my teammates, especially the defense. Last year against Mississippi State, our defense played great. They played great today. All three of those bowl games were truly team wins. I can't thank my teammates enough for allowing me to be in that position.

Q. Ihmir, the jet sweep seemed to really work tonight. Is this something you saw on film in the early stages of planning? Is this something you wanted to attack?

IHMIR SMITH-MARSETTE: Most definitely. We watched film a lot. Depending on the coverages we did, what we get on defense, how they play things, being able to use misdirection with the reverse move, then the sweep, being able to motion back and forth, get them unbalanced out of their positions, definitely huge for us in preparation.

Just going out there and executing at a high level with the tight ends blocking, incredible blocks out there, being able to shut that corner out, Nate following up after that. It's definitely something big, something we

saw on film early, thought we could take control over.

NATE STANLEY: A lot of teams had success. BYU, Utah in particular. That's something that the coach does a great job of. Like Ihmir said, we put in a lot of time and we see that they had some problems defending those. We were able to exploit those weaknesses as well.

Q. Nate, 10-win season, bowl win. How do you assess what your team was able to do?

NATE STANLEY: Yeah, just a true team win today. Our defense played great, our offense played great, our special teams obviously with the kick return. Our kick coverage did a great job.

It's just awesome to end the season with a win. Momentum into the off-season is huge. Our goal of a Big Ten championship was taken. We didn't play well enough in a couple games to put ourselves in that position. When we knew that goal was off the table, we set our sights on a new goal. Everybody bought in. Everybody was bought in from January. Every single person bought into what we wanted to do. Every single one of those 19 seniors showed a great example of what to do and how to get there. Everybody responded.

This team is probably one of the closest teams that I've been on in my four years here. It's just extremely special to reap the harvest really. When you can go out and win with your teammates, especially against USC, in a prime time game in a place like this, it's extremely special.

Q. Ihmir, Media Day you predicted not one kick return this year for a touchdown, but two. What does it mean to accomplish that?

IHMIR SMITH-MARSETTE: To be able to accomplish that, I could say I'm a man of my word. You can hold me to it. Just being able to go out there, battle with the other 10 guys on that unit throughout the season. All credit to them. They work their ass off to go out there, sacrifice they body for me.

Just being able to run behind them is incredible. They set me up perfectly tonight. All I did was follow my blockers. Credit to them.

Q. A.J., in the second half they have a minute drive, go down and score. You are probably figuring out what the heck happened. On-side kick, going back out. How big was that that you get the stop there?

A.J. ESPENESA: It's no different than any other difficult situation. You don't ask who started the fire, you just put it out. That's our mentality on the field no matter where we're at. Play your hardest. The goal is three-

and-out. We want to get the offense back on the field to score points.

Q. (No microphone.)

A.J. ESPENESA: I guess a little bit. They caught us by surprise. We had no idea an on-side kick was coming. That's exactly what you practice for. What's it called, the change?

NATE STANLEY: Sudden change.

A.J. ESPENESA: Yeah, sudden change. We just got on to the bench, talking about the last drive. Like you said, bam, we're back on the field. We practice for situations like that. We were prepared for it.

Q. (No microphone.)

NATE STANLEY: A tradition that Coach Fry had. We felt to honor him we would do that.

IHMIR SMITH-MARSETTE: I walked in pretty late. I was outside. Just being able to walk in, the seniors usually bring it up after big wins. I thought we were going to senior fight song, then you hear, Put your right foot in.

Like Nate said, it's a tradition. Special being able to have everybody in the locker room contribute to it. It's a special thing.

Q. A.J., walk us through the play where you injured Slovis. Are you going for the sack? Any news on the NFL?

A.J. ESPENESA: That play, I mean, it was a pass down. I had been doing some stuff earlier in the game, some power moves, some stuff. I was able to get him with the speed rushing, getting him to be able to lean a little bit. He's right handed, I'm on the blindside. He didn't see me coming. I was going for the ball, wanted to get the ball back to the offense.

I'm glad they ruled it a fumble, but there was no loss of yardage or anything. It was basically just second down I think was the end thing. But they counted it as a sack. I think he dropped a potential interception there, didn't he? We ended up finishing that series, getting off the field, getting offense back out.

Q. Ihmir, if you could think back to the kick return, what yardline did you realize you could take it to the house?

IHMIR SMITH-MARSETTE: So I caught it about the two yard line. Set up to go to the left. They had an issue with that all season. I had one guy down at my legs, I did a mini hurdle. After that there was only one blocker. He was getting blocked already. I gave him the inside move.

I said it before, I'm not going to let no kicker catch me. Don't let the kicker catch me, the last guy. Just using my speed, got to the end zone. Turned around, thanked all my teammates.

Q. Nate, you were standing alone on the sidelines for a little while. Were you gathering your thoughts? You started dishing up the hugs. What was going through your mind?

NATE STANLEY: Just kind of taking in the moment. Yeah, I mean, just taking in the moment. He is a pretty good friend of mine. Extremely special for him to make that play.

Initially I thought at the end of the game, get down, but saw him taking it to the house, it was pretty special. Taking in the moment, just kind of reflecting on the game, this season a little bit.

Q. All three of you, what does this mean to be able to do this for Kirk Ferentz?

A.J. ESPENESA: I know it was a big deal. Coach Fry was a mentor for Coach Ferentz. I mean, the legacy he left on the University of Iowa is unmatched by anybody. You think of Iowa, you think of Hayden Fry and Dan Gable and people like that.

To be able to have a man like that just touch a program so much in that way, it makes you feel good to be part of a program like this and to be a part of a team coached by Coach Ferentz.

IHMIR SMITH-MARSETTE: Yeah, it's definitely special just being able to come out here, execute at a high level, play a name brand team, play the way we did, put the points up the way we did. We were able to separate at a high level, especially we wanted to get this win for him, Coach Fry was a big factor in Coach Ferentz' life. That loss hit him hard. Just being able to come out here and get the win for him, celebrate with him afterwards, shake him, give him a hug, let him know we here for him.

NATE STANLEY: Just the legacy that Bump and Coach Fry left, I think it's only right that we honor them, play our best, play our hardest, kind of try to honor them through the way that we play.

I think coach wouldn't have had it any other way, for us to be able to come out and honor them by playing this style of football that they kind of set forth for the Iowa Hawkeyes, that's the best way to honor them and their legacy.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.