

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Wednesday, October 11, 2017

Brian Ferentz



BRIAN FERENTZ: Good afternoon, and thank you guys for coming. We're at the halfway point, interesting the bye week comes right at the halfway point.

If you look at us offensively going back to week 1, we knew we were going to have some young guys, some new guys stepping into quite a few positions. We were interested and apprehensive maybe about how they would play and perform, and I think those guys have pretty much acquitted themselves very well through six games, and then you look at some other positions we're a little bit more veteran, and maybe the results haven't been what we expected or what we wanted. Bottom line is we're sitting at 4-2, and if you surveyed anybody on the staff or any of our players who I know you guys see every week, our expectation was to be at 6-0. Any game we play we expect to win it, and we don't have the liberty of worrying about Vegas lines and things of that nature or who's experienced, who's not experienced, where the game is, what time it's at. We expect to win every game we play, and we've had opportunities to win the two games that we didn't win.

We're frustrated and certainly disappointed by that but not discouraged. If you look at us moving into the second half of the season, from the offensive standpoint, the first thing we need to do is establish our run game with some consistency, and we're sitting at 3.7 a carry, and that's not going to help us win any Big Ten games. We have six Big Ten games remaining, the West division is certainly still up for grabs.

What we need to do is establish the run game, and probably just as concerning are our turnover numbers, and we sit at 11 turnovers on the year. Two interceptions, and both of those interceptions, I'm sure the quarterback would like to have them back, but he's sitting at 15 touchdowns to two interceptions, so we're not quite as concerned about the interceptions, but nine fumbles, 14 on the ground, nine lost, that's a real bad number, and I've never been around a really good championship level football team that's fumbled the ball at that rate. The good news is we've got six games to clean it up. We certainly intend to.

Q. How do you measure the run game?

BRIAN FERENTZ: There's a lot more to it, but if you look at just a baseline number, when you look at yards per carry, usually it is representative of where you're at

for a season. That's a really good number to look at. Just from this standpoint: All those things tend to balance each other out when you look at the yards per carry. Certainly if it's 3rd and 2 and we get two yards plus an inch, we're pretty happy. That's a win. If it's 1st and 10 you expect four yards, and that's how we measure it. If you're on the goal line, you expect to score. All those things factor in.

But if you look at it over a season and over a large sample size, usually all that stuff -- it kind of evens out, and when you get into the average, I know this, if you're averaging over five a carry, you have a pretty good football team typically, pretty good run game, it's pretty healthy. If you're somewhere around four and a half, you're probably playing winning football, at least for us and our numbers, but if you're below that, it's not good enough.

When you look at it as an entirety, the season to this point, at times the run game has been very efficient, has been very productive for us, and it was a week ago. We were running the ball pretty well. Certainly makes it easier to find rhythm as an offensive unit, but if you look at us two weeks ago in East Lansing, the numbers would bear it out there, we weren't running the ball efficiently and it was really causing some problems for us offensively.

Q. How do you guys measure run efficiency?

BRIAN FERENTZ: We don't so much look at run efficiency as we look at 1st down efficiency or 3rd down efficiency. We try to treat it a lot more situationally. So the run game can be extremely efficient on 3rd and 1, but maybe in that situation we're averaging 1.7 a carry. But the run game could be below efficiency on 1st down -- if we're averaging 3.7 a carry on 1st down, we're not hitting our goal. We'd like to be 2nd and 6 certainly on 1st down. You can measure run efficiency a lot of ways. If you go through every single play and if we were to pull up the tape and just say, all right, here's all the runs from this season, here's all, whatever it is, 213 of them, some of those runs are called runs where there's a bubble pass being spit out. If the bubble pass makes five yards, it's pretty efficient, we'll take it as a run. If the bubble pass makes three yards, we should have thrown it, should have handed the ball off. We hand the ball off, it makes two yards, but it's 1st and 10, not efficient. It's

3rd and 1 and a half and we make two yards, same play, we're pretty happy.

So there's some variables that go into it. I do think the yards per carry is a fair number, like I said, when you look at the average and things tend to balance out over time. We'd like to be sitting right around five yards a carry, and certainly we're well off that right now.

Q. It's obvious you guys did a lot of self-scouting in the off-season based on not only the personnel groupings but when you do it, how you do it and how you approach it. What did you see on 3rd down from last year, for instance, I think the first five games out of your 57 3rd down plays, 50 of them were in 11 grouping, now it's completely different, all over the place. How much of that did you examine, how much of that has been measured to try to vary what you're doing on those downs and distances?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Certainly you want to have some balance to what you're doing. But what really factors more into those decisions on 3rd and 2 to 10 is typically who are your best players, what's the best way to get them the ball, and how can you best match up against what somebody else is doing, and typically anywhere from 3rd and 4 to 10 yards, you're going to see some form of cover one every week, some kind of man coverage. You're probably going to see some kind of zone. For most people it lives in the two high world. For some people, they play a little bit of post safety zone to match their one.

How can you best effect that? How can you best get match-ups, and how can you get the ball to the guys you really want to get it to, the guys that can win in those situations, and whether it's more mesh type crossing routes, if you look at us, I know we've always said this in the run game, hey, we run three plays, and that's true, and that's still true. We run three plays. How they get dressed up, what personnel group, formationally, how we try to match those things up, that can vary a lot week to week, and really when you look at the passing game and especially 3rd down passing game, it's pretty much the same thing. You're going to try to run about three or four concepts. How many different ways can you make them look? Sometimes it's as easy as changing personnel groups and just having a bigger guy do something a smaller guy normally does, and usually that's far away from the play. It's window dressing. But we try to be cognizant every week of what we don't want to do is go out there and run the same play we ran the week before the same way we ran it because that's what those guys watch, just like they don't want to line up and everybody has these exotic 3rd down blitzes. We're not typically going to see the same one that they

showed on tape the week before. They know we've studied that. So it's kind of that cat-and-mouse game.

We like to change the personnel, but when you look at a guy like Noah Fant, he really lives in that hybrid world anyway, so sometimes we have two tight ends on the field, but we just as easily could play with three receivers on the field and do the same kind of thing.

If you look at what we've done, sometimes you have the same call come up two or three times, you put a little formation or personnel window dressing on it.

Q. How would you assess Nate Stanley?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Right now I think we have a pretty efficient young quarterback who's exceeded our expectations and really has done a fairly good job for us. You look at the touchdowns, interceptions, you look at the completion percentage, he's right at about 57 percent. So just his efficiency numbers have been impressive.

One thing I'd say about Nate, I feel good about how he's grown as the season has gone on, and I think the benefit to a young guy like Nate who's 19 years old, he's in his first year as a full-time starter, and he's seen more defensively in six games than I think a lot of guys do maybe in two years, and that just is because of the schedule we've played and how people have chosen to defend us. That's a real positive. How he's handled it along the way, also very positive. We've had some real low lows. We try to kick into a two-minute situation there at the end of the half in the first game, and we can't get the snap. We can't even get the snap.

Then you fast forward a week later and we have two big tempo situations where we have to go score and get points, and he's operating like he's done it for five years. So you look at what he's done, you're real encouraged, but also he has a lot of room to grow. I mentioned the fumbles. Shoot, he's responsible for three of them, and two of them weren't even contested. He's got to do a better job taking care of the ball. He's done a pretty good job in the throwing game, now we have to have a little bit more ball security back there in the pocket, but he's a guy that's got us in and out of the right plays, and he's been extremely efficient throwing the ball as I mentioned. You look at 3rd down, he's gotten the ball out on time, and he's gotten it to where it has to go the majority of the time.

You look at last week and we were right off our 3rd down number; we weren't quite exactly where we wanted to be, but he threw the ball 12 times on 3rd down last week. He completed nine of them. He completed nine of them. Six of them were conversions. If you're completing the ball nine times on 3rd down in 12 attempts, you have a chance. You have a chance.

We chose to run the ball a couple other times, and then really if you look at two of the incompletions, he didn't make a great decision.

I think a more veteran quarterback checks the ball down, and we probably are looking at two more conversions plus 11 completions on 3rd down, so if you just look at some of the things he's doing from a numerical standpoint, it's very encouraging. But I think the challenge for him is just like the challenge for a guy like Tristan Wirfs or Brandon Smith or Ihmir Smith-Marsette or Noah Fant or T.J. Hockenson, go down the list, right, some of these young guys we're playing, can we continue to improve and how much better can we get. Because I think it's real easy sometimes as a young player to start feeling like maybe you've accomplished something or you have arrived, and we went through that after the Iowa State game. The goal around here is not to be 2-0, it's not to beat Iowa State. Just like the goal is not to come close with Penn State. We expect to beat Penn State, and that was the comment in the meeting room afterwards. I told those guys, was anybody here surprised when we were in the football game in the fourth quarter despite our best efforts offensively to not be in the football game? Was anybody surprised? And the answer was no, and of course it's not. We expect to win the football games we play. But I think young guys have to learn, right, it's so easy to be satisfied with things. I don't think Nate is in danger of that, but I know why you ask the question and I hesitate to say anything other than he's a young guy who's done well, but I think he has a chance to be a really good football player here, and I think that puts him in a club with a lot of other young guys we have, but are we going to go do that, or are we going to be satisfied with being 4-2 and being average? That's the question.

Q. What's your definition of success in the passing game? Is it completion percentage, something else?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, definitely success would be completing them. And it's like I mentioned with the football games, we don't dial up shots down the field expecting to throw incompletions. Now, you try to be realistic, you're not going to complete every ball that goes down the field. But I'll tell you what, we'd better start completing some of them because I really think that would help us offensively.

But when you dial up those deep shots, the true shots where you're sending the ball down the field no matter what, if you send one down the field once a quarter and you look at four a game, if you're hitting on two of those, I think you're really, really good. If you're hitting on one, you're doing pretty well because those are the type plays that change the game. But certainly we haven't been afraid to send it down the field. Probably

looking at more like five or six a game for us, and when we hit those, it really changes the complexion of things, and I think what that just comes down to is, again, it's the word that nobody wants to hear, but it's execution, and I think that falls on us as coaches, starting with me. I've got to do a better job in practice making sure we get those things repped, making sure we get them hit, giving those guys opportunities to make those plays so that when we get to the game field on Saturday, we feel like we're ready to do that, and we can reasonably expect to be successful doing it.

Q. We talked about you never having called a play before. How have you evolved as a play caller?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, you don't really dwell too much on the successes. I'm not sure there's been that many. I know this: I feel a little bit better calling a play when you go into the first game and you've never done it before, you wonder if anything you call is going to be successful. You might be the first play caller in history to not make a 1st down in 12 games. You have those kind of thoughts. It's kind of like being a player, you get in there a little bit and you make a couple calls and you have some good ones and some bad ones and some things work and don't work and you start to feel a little bit more comfortable in your role.

But I don't know that I've done anything particularly well. I know our players have done a really nice job of turning some average things into good things. Fortunately we have an excellent staff. There's such diverse background, and there's a lot of great ideas that come in there. You've got a guy like Ken who's done it here and then was in the National Football League, and you just look at the job he's done with Nate Stanley. You asked a question about Nate Stanley, well, he's played really well. Why? One, because Nate Stanley is a good player and it matters a lot to him; two, because Ken O'Keefe has done a tremendous job getting him ready to play. You look at the improvement he makes every week, I think that's a direct reflection of the job Ken's done.

You look at Kelton; we have young receivers playing really well. Well, they're being coached extremely well and brought along and pushed forward. Cope has done a great job.

LeVar has done a really, really good job, right. Special teams I can't speak to other than this: I know this: We start with the ball outside our own 30 a lot, right, and the other team doesn't. So I think our special teams we're covering kicks, we're kicking better than we ever have. We've got fakes, I told those guys my only frustration right now with their special teams is if we could just score on one of these fakes. Boy, it's a lot easier -- instead our offense has to go out there and score. It's a lot easier if we just score on the fake, take

some pressure off of us. But the job LeVar has done with our special teams I think is excellent.

But we have two young tight ends. T.J. Hockenson hasn't played a down here, and I think he's one of the better ones or has a chance to be one of the better ones we've had. Noah Fant has been excellent for us. He played about 30 snaps last year. You look at what LeVar has done, and shoot, nobody has had a harder job than Tim coming in here, and all of a sudden the whole line gets blown up and he gets to learn from day one what it's like when you have some injuries and things change, and he's done a tremendous job. You look at a guy guys like Wirfs step in, that's not easy to do, to start here as a true freshman, as a tackle, and really had two bad plays. So I think that's a testament to the coaching that's gone on there. So like my job is pretty easy, my life is pretty easy.

But as a play caller, I think about the bad calls. I think about calling a gimmick play down there backed up against Penn State that cost us two points, probably changed the complexion of the game. I think about a couple 4th down calls you wish you had back, starting with the one last week. We run the same play that we had run on 3rd and 1 a little bit earlier, they're loaded up for bear, we come back later, throw it on 3rd and 2 and hit it for 18 yards. That's all we had to do the first time.

I'm more focused on things I haven't done well. I don't think we had a good plan going into Michigan State running the football, and then unfortunately our line has got to take the brunt of the criticism. I think that starts with me. I didn't design it very well. We didn't have a good plan going in there. We didn't ask guys to do things that were going to help us be successful, so who's fault is that? That's mine. I've got to live with that. I know we talked before the season, I think I was pretty realistic about what the job was going to entail. I knew it was going to be hard. I knew there were going to be good moments, and there's no better moment than the one we had at Iowa State. That's as high as it gets, right, but there's no worse moment than some of the ones we had in East Lansing. That's as low as it gets, and that's how this job works.

And I think it's like being a player, if you're a player, a coach, if you compete, this is what you do for a living, the minute you think you have it figured out, the minute you think you're any good at anything, right, that's when somebody is sneaking up to get you because we never have it figured out. We're never any good, and I think we're learning as a team. When we think we're good, we have got a problem. If we just operate like we're not, then we have a chance to maybe win a couple football games.

Q. Conceptually at the passing game, seems like there's more of a concerted effort not only to get the tight ends involved but also within the hash marks, and you've been really successful at that. Was that something that you looked at in the spring as keys to success in the future, and how have you been able to apply that if that's the case?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think it's more what I'm comfortable with. It's more the background that I've come out of and where I've been. I learned from Ken a long time ago. That's the background Ken has. Start with this: we try to model ourselves after a high school offense, and if you have a high school quarterback it's a lot easier to throw balls in high school, not between the hashes because that's like the whole field, right, but in college football between the hashes, those are certainly more manageable throws and catches. And then you just look at this, too; we talked about this, I think, in the preseason. We're driven by our tight ends, right. We're driven by our tight ends. We can recruit tight ends. We know we can get guys in here to play tight end. Typically we have some receiving threats out of the backfield. Those guys live between the hashes. That's the easiest place to throw them the ball. You've got to be able to go vertical to some extent. You need to threaten the defense down the field.

More than anything, it's funny you bring it up because I'm just looking at our 3rd down yesterday, and if you look at us, we probably need to throw the ball outside the hashes a little bit more on 3rd down based on what I was looking at.

But you try to be as balanced as you can. You try to make the defense defend the whole field. I think we've had real good moments this year in the run and pass game where we're making teams defend the entirety of the field. Even if everything is not paying off for us, the more we can stretch them out and make them respect everything, then the more certain things open up. And then I think we've had other moments where we haven't been as good.

And I'd say this: Yeah, we've been between the hashes a little bit, whether it's crossing routes, in cuts, seam balls, all those things. I think probably we need to focus a little bit more outside the hashes because the one thing is the defense knows this, it's a lot easier to throw it between the hashes. Typically the coverage is going to be a little bit softer on the outside. I'd like to see us hit more comebacks and hole shots and things of that nature. It probably starts with me helping them out and getting some of those things called.

Q. Would you say James Butler is close to coming back? With him going down, how did that change what you wanted to do on 3rd down?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I don't know how much it changed things on 3rd down. We've tried to focus more on getting those backs out of the backfield than necessarily lining them in space. But maybe on 1st and 2nd down, some of those two halfback packages we had kind of played with and experimented a little bit with in the first couple games, that kind of went by the wayside initially. I think we'd be a little bit silly not to look at playing a guy like Toren or Ivory just a little bit more on 1st and 2nd down here in the coming weeks without James. And I don't know when James will be back; that's probably a better question for the head coach. I know he's working hard to get back. It's a serious injury, and we can't heal up the bone. I know he wishes he could. He's done a really nice job with his rehab. But while he's out, a guy like Toren, I really believe has earned carries here. I think when he goes out on the field, he gives us a little bit of something. Ivory was probably going to see the field a little bit more on Saturday until his first carry, then we weren't so excited about putting him back in, and he understands that, and he learned his lesson, I hope.

But I think we have to be a little more open to playing some of those guys early, and it'll help Akrum, as well. You can't have Akrum out there for 60 plays a game. That's probably not helping him get anything done.

Q. Is this the offensive line you see going forward except for Boone probably getting back and getting healthy?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I hope this is our line moving forward. I'm not naïve enough to believe that it definitely is going to be. We'd like to get Boone back in the lineup. Boone has struggled with injuries. He's another guy, whether it's Boone or Ike, I think this has to be mentioned, too. This isn't always appreciated from the outside. Nobody has had a harder job than Boone Myers this year because he hasn't been 100 percent, and he's gone from being the alpha to not being able to do some of the things he's used to being able to do, physically can't do it -- I told him this the other day. Unfortunately we live in a world, and the kids are in this world, too, where they're going to judge themselves based on how they're performing on the field. And that's probably because that's how we've told them it's going to be judged for a long time.

But you've got a guy now that physically can't do some of the things that he used to be able to do. That's a really hard position to be in, and I can't say enough about how he's responded to that, and instead of being bitter, right, or angry or sulking or doing any of those things, the first thing he did was put his arm around a guy like Alaric Jackson or last week a guy like Tristan Wirfs and help them get ready to play, and I think that's really difficult to do. I think it's really hard to do.

I hope someday, I hope in 20 years that my son, whatever he's doing, can be the kind of team member or community guy that Boone Myers has been for us. I really hope he can be, because to me that says a lot more about him than anything he's ever done on the field performance-wise. Same thing for Ike coming off the injuries. Disappointing, but he's helped some of those young guys come along.

I hope we can keep this group intact. If we can, then I think we have a chance to build a little bit of cohesiveness and chemistry. But more than anything, I think the onus falls on myself and the coaching staff. We need to find a way to put guys into positions that they can be successful in, and whatever that is week to week, and things change, and everybody has injuries, we're not the only people that have injuries, we need to find a better way to manage what we have and squeeze something out of it because if we don't get to running the ball, if we don't get to being a little bit more efficient on 1st and 2nd down, I don't think we reasonably expect to be successful as an offensive unit, and if we're not, then boy, we're putting a lot pressure on the defense and special teams. So we need to get back to controlling the football. We need to get back to running it. We'd like to keep this group intact, but most importantly, I think I need to do a better job of getting us going downhill a little bit.

Q. In January Nick Easley shows up and I think he's your top targeted wide receiver, showing great body control, showing great courage. How did you find him?

BRIAN FERENTZ: We didn't find him. We lucked into him. He's a guy we called on Christmas and said, hey, would you be interested in walking on. I believe he was walking on at Iowa State. It was obviously a position of need, we were scouring some things. Tyler Barnes kind of dug his name up and we called him. We were down in Tampa. He said, yeah, I'd love to walk on. I believe his mom works in the University, so it was a little bit easier for him, and he did. And then we've said since day one, this guy is working hard. I know we mention his name a lot, and like you said, it doesn't mean a lot, but we saw him every day, and we saw the way he competed. I'm not saying he's Riley McCarron, but in a lot of ways he's reminding me of Riley since he got here. He's a guy who knows what he is and knows what he isn't, and he knows what he has to do to get on the field, and that is to have a little courage and go to some dark places, and he's done that for us, and he's been extremely reliable. He's been a nice little safety blanket.

He's moved into that Z position, which has allowed us to move Matt and really it gave some balance to our receiving corps where we knew we were going to be young. So we were fortunate. He was a little bit of a

Godsend. And that allowed us to buy some time, too, to bring some of these young guys along. So Nick has done a tremendous job since he got here, but then you look at guys like Ihmir Smith-Marsette, Brandon Smith, and Max Cooper, I'd throw in that category, too. We need to get him on the field a little bit more. But these are guys that since the day they showed up, they didn't worry about how old they were or how much experience they had or didn't have, Nick Easley didn't worry about how many schools recruited him or didn't recruit him. They come to work every day and they do their job. And it's amazing, if you just come do that, you get a little bit better each day.

These guys have really performed pretty well. Whether it's Nick whether it's Ihmir or whether it's Brandon or Max or Noah, go down the list, right, T.J., I'd throw Ivory in that group, too, young guys, Toren has played a little bit, we need to make sure we're not satisfied. We need to make sure that we have our eyes on something just a little bit bigger down the road here, and if we can keep improving -- I'm extremely optimistic about what I think we can be.

But at some point we have to go do it just like we can talk about ball security and we can work on ball security but at some point we've got to hold on to the ball because that's the only way to change those turnover numbers.

Q. When you look at Matt Quarrels, a guy who came in late, started late, does he fit in right now?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, right now, no. Right now we've got guys that are ahead of him, and the challenge would be for Matt to push and move past some of these guys. They obviously had a head start on him. But right now those guys have continued to climb, and it's not so much what Matt is or is not doing, it's the fact these other guys are coming in every day and pushing it forward, and so I think the challenge for Matt would be to get going a little bit and try to pass him. But right now the encouraging thing is we have healthy competition in that room. I don't know if we could have said that back in March. That's encouraging in and of itself that we're talking about guys that aren't seeing the field. I think that's good news, right?

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Phil Parker



PHIL PARKER: Thank you for the opportunity to be in here today, to talk to you guys a little bit. We're 4-2, which everybody would like to be 6-0 at this point in time. The defensive effort-wise, I'm pleased with what they're doing out there. Obviously we've got to play cleaner football to win games, and I think the depth of what we've been doing with rotation up front with the eight guys up front, it's given us some more experience. I think the linebackers inside, obviously this week we're getting a lot of work with our linebackers in the backup position, and we've finally settled down in the defensive backfield of getting the guys in the right places. Obviously getting Brandon Snyder back has been a plus with his leadership and his communication in the back end.

To me, I'm encouraged for the second half of the season. We're looking forward to the up front guys. I think they're getting some guys like Epenesa some reps in there, 34 reps it was last week. I think our guys up front will start getting a little bit of disruption up front, and obviously we're not doing a bad job with sacks right now. But the linebackers are playing solid, and I feel very comfortable where we're at in the secondary, and I think it's going to be a great challenge.

On the start of the season, starting out with Wyoming obviously was a challenge trying to defend an NFL quarterback that's probably going to be a first-rounder, and then you go in to play Iowa State, a rival game, which I think they had some very talented wide receivers that gave us a challenge, and then you go obviously into Penn State with Barkley and the quarterback. That combination that gave us some issues, and I thought we played them very tough.

And then Michigan State is a typical game against two teams that play very physical.

I'm excited about the second half. I'm looking forward to it. Obviously to me, I look at where we're at statistically. Everybody has statistics. The only one I worry about is the wins and losses, that's one, but I do have some -- our third down is right around 67. We want to be 68, so I think that's good. The red zone, we kind of look at it different ways of how many times they actually get a possession in the red zone, and we figure the number is right around four points. If you're

giving up four points per possession in there, I think that's good. I think we're at 4.3, not good enough.

I think another place where we can really improve is not giving up explosive plays, and ironically the explosive plays that we gave up, I think we gave up four explosives in Iowa State, and we gave five up in the Illinois game, and we happened to win both of those. That's very uncharacteristic of the statistics in that part of it.

And probably the most important stat to me is how many points you're giving up, and right now we're at 18.7, which compared to the last four years, I think that's right on the mark, so that's interesting. Our job is to keep them out of the end zone. I think we have done a better job the last week getting takeaways, and we were down on that, and I think somewhere right around five or six last week helped us out a little bit. We've got to continue to do that better.

From that standpoint, we're just looking to move forward, and it's a great week to have some guys get some rest.

Q. You mentioned AJ in your opening remarks and pass rush situations where you expect the team to throw the ball. Is stopping the run kind of the next step for his progress as a player?

PHIL PARKER: I think he's doing a little bit better job of that, and playing on 1st and 2nd down, he's understanding that. Obviously the reps he's been getting from camp and all the last six weeks of the season here, I think it's really going to help us later on in the run game. I think he's a good run player. I think he can help us in the pass rush on third downs.

Q. When you look at somebody like Miles, who's built up a lot of equity in the program, been a three-year starter, but then you have somebody like Amani who just seems to be playing and progressing, maybe unexpected for his age, how difficult of a challenge is it for you to look at somebody like Miles who has been in the program for so long but yet has somebody that's outplaying him in a little younger player?

PHIL PARKER: Well, the great thing about it here at Iowa, my job is to put the best players on the field that can help us win, and I think the leadership that Miles

brings in the back end of understanding the game, I think him helping out Amani Hooker and the way he does and how positive he's been during this time, the last couple weeks, I think it's been really good for our team.

Q. Do you anticipate Amani being the strong safety going forward?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, as of right now I think he's doing a good job, and to that aspect, as long as he can keep up with what we're doing on defense and understanding what he has to do, I think he's been doing a good job. We've got three good guys that can play there, maybe four, so I'm very comfortable with the guys where we're at right now, but obviously I think Hooker has definitely earned some playing time.

Q. What impresses you the most about Amani's progression from last year to this year?

PHIL PARKER: Well, last year he really didn't understand what was going on on the defensive side. Very good athlete, has very good skill. He has the ability to move and run, and he has a great feel for the ball, where it's at, obviously, and obviously last week's game, understanding how to get underneath that route and picked that interception off. He had an excellent play over on the sideline when they threw a ball to the flat in the Illinois game. The way he closed and to be able to track the ball and be able to tackle, and go back to the Penn State game, there's one play on there I just looked at last week, I mean yesterday, that he made when Barkley was coming out, and he was a one-on-one, and he tracked him down and made a tackle that was surely going to be a touchdown, and it just shows to me that he's progressing every day, he's getting better. Think with Snyder there to help him out, it's going to help us be a lot better in the back end.

Q. With Brandon coming back, what does he add to the defense, and could you tell something was missing when he was missing all that time in the first five games or so?

PHIL PARKER: Well, obviously his experience of being back there and the commitment that he's been to understanding the defense and understanding what we have to do and understanding the offense that he sees. He has great communication. The communication has really picked up since he's been out there, and you can see him directing traffic out there and understanding not only what the plays they're going to run but making sure that everybody is in the right coverage, in the right defense, at the right time.

Q. How do you feel about what you're getting from your pass rush right now?

PHIL PARKER: I think we're doing pretty good. You look at it and say, I think they've been putting enough

pressure on them. I think we've got to do a better job in the coverage a little bit. But I think our pass rush with Anthony Nelson and AJ has been doing a good job. Right now we're not as bad as I think people think we are. There's a lot of pressure on them. You look at how many times we hit the quarterback at Penn State, I don't think he was even hit twice before we played him. We hit him four times, I think.

Q. You talk about Brandon; how difficult is it for somebody who's been out for six months not just to be able to walk on the field and play a few snaps here and there to get his feet wet, but he went in, started and excelled in just that one game?

PHIL PARKER: He's been progressing ever since he's been really working hard to come back from that injury, which is hard to come back to in a short period of time. But once you understand and you've been through and you've been playing and all of a sudden you take time where you go back and you can sit there and watch as a coach or watch on the sideline, seeing the guys play and practice and go through a game and mentally, you're taking the mental reps and he so much became such a better player by watching. He's a guy that can sit there on the sideline and absorb what's going on and what somebody should do at his position, and he encouraged the other guys.

When Jake was in there, he was trying to tell him, hey, you've got to see this a little bit faster, can you get this key, know the splits of the wide receivers. He's a guy that's into it. He's a guy that studies the game a lot and spends a lot of time in the film room.

Q. Josey came out of the game for a little while with his shoulder. Is he good to go?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, I think this is a perfect time for the bye week. He's a tough player. That's what we're about, and I think for us, how many snaps he's playing and how many plays he's making, your body takes a toll, and obviously we have to give him a break of contact and let him rest and once again, I think by standing and watching, his game is going to become more better -- he'll improve this week just by watching, and I think he's done that. So I'm excited about it. I'm not worried about it, and we're expecting him to be ready for Northwestern.

Q. Manny turned the health corner, will the bye week --

PHIL PARKER: It definitely gives him another week. I played him in one snap, probably shouldn't have. That was probably my mistake putting him in the game based on the personnel that was on the field, and I think another week would help him, and he's doing a good job with that. Obviously he's into it, and he knows what's going on. He's a very sharp kid football-

wise, so I don't think not being on the field mentally is going to bother him. Him getting that thing better where he needs to be able to run and cover guys.

Q. Are you happy with the overall secondary given the amount of turnover you've had this year due to injury, whatnot?

PHIL PARKER: Well, you're never happy. There's not a game that you go through and say, hey, we played well. There's always issues on the field that you say, hey, we could have played this better, and I think you can look at that from the defensive line all the way to the linebackers and all the secondary. We can play better. Everybody can play better. And we can coach better. We can make better calls. We can prepare our guys better. You evaluate everything during this period of time, and I think that's really a plus for us going to the second half of the season with all this time that we can sit back and look at some of the things, how people are trying to attack us and to shore up of that stuff and obviously you get some guys some rest this week.

Q. How would you assess the development of the backup linebackers?

PHIL PARKER: It's been pretty good. They haven't had much chance to be in there at live competition. Towards the end of last week we got them in there for the last eight, nine minutes of play, probably wasn't enough. But obviously the biggest focus is trying to win the game at hand first. They've got to earn that spot. They've got to get our trust to get on the field, and obviously this was a big week for them to get out there and move some guys around and figure out who's going to be the next guys in at Mike or Will back or the Leo backer.

Q. I think your perimeter defense has been pretty good but you're getting attacked more and more there. How would you assess it?

PHIL PARKER: There's some things where we think we're pretty decent on the outside. Obviously there's two games that stand out that we gave up too many yards rushing, and obviously Barkley is a good player, but I think we gave up one explosive play. If you count when his knee was down, that wouldn't be an explosive play, so we gave up really one explosive play to him.

If you look at how many explosive plays have we given up in the games, and then we lost -- we're 2-2 in that, and then the ones we gave up more, we end up winning. Sometimes stats are stack up on a number or something like that, I think our deal is to improve on that, be a little bit more disciplined in tackling and our penalties and making sure that we're all on the same page with communication, which I think has really picked up since Brandon has been back on the field.

Q. When you look at the way Josh has played, he started the bowl game, he played a little nickel and dime before in the last couple years, but he's really seemed to jump like three levels, and he's one of the best in the Big Ten and even in country in pass breakups and he's physical. What made you think that he could make those kinds of strides so quickly, and how has he been able to do it?

PHIL PARKER: I think the way his work ethic has been since the start of last January, how he's been preparing in the weight room and how he's been working out in the off-season and doing the seven-on-sevens that we have during the summers that the kids go on, and he's pushing it, and he's come to a point in his life that it's time to grow up, and now he's a full-time starter. Now we expect more out of you. I still think he has a lot more upside than how he's playing now. I think maybe towards last week, I think he played okay. I think he's been playing well, but I think he can even play better for what he has.

Q. What are those areas that he can improve on?

PHIL PARKER: I think sometimes setting the edges on the outside. We lost contain one time on the Penn State game where he was playing cover two, he should have support outside, he knows better to stay outside, and he let Barkley outside on that play and gives up a touchdown. I mean, that's just common sense things. Keep the things inside and in front. I think he's learning from those aspects of it. I know he's got a lot of tipped balls, that he gets up there, looks like he's going to intercept it or something. I'd like him to have two hands on the ball, and he might have a couple more interceptions. So he always needs to improve. His ability to go ahead and keep his focus during a game and make sure he doesn't get distracted by anything and make sure he can do his job within what we're asking him to do.

Q. How much does the defensive line rotate -- when do you decide who you're going to play and how much has that helped your defense?

PHIL PARKER: I definitely think it's helped us. When you go with a lot of plays on the field and you get those guys and you're confident and putting them in the game, and I definitely think the ability to have a rotation going where you can have a guy that has a little bit of rest to go back out there, and they're getting close to where like, hey, doesn't really matter who's in the game as long as they can go hold their point, I think we have a chance. A lot of you guys are surprised I brought up the pressure stuff. We're not a big pressure team. We pressure when we have to, when we feel like it, and it's selective, and it's more of a feel thing than where we're at. Our guys up front have done a good job of rotating in. I think moving Matt Nelson inside has really helped us tremendously, what he's added to it, and with his

leadership and Parker Hesse on the outside, I think we have a good group of front eight guys that are doing a hell of a job.

Q. Has that group made it so you don't really need to use the raider package, or is that something that's still kind of in your --

PHIL PARKER: Well, the idea of getting speed on the field, and when you go ahead and put your -- sometimes we put four new fast guys on the field, and when you've got Anthony on the field and you've got AJ on the field and Parker Hesse with that speed up there, that gives us a little bit of advantage of, do you put another backer in or do you take a defensive lineman out, so I think it's a choice that we kind of made and said, hey, we still have a four-man rush and still can defend the run because just because you go over there and start playing the pass too much and don't have your defensive linemen in there, now all of a sudden somebody pulls out a run play on you and you can't defend it as well.

Definitely that is a thing that we lean more on nickel with four defensive linemen than our bandit or raider package.

Q. When you look at your backup linebackers again, Hockaday went in the other day for Josey Jewell. You also have Mends and Jones and Welch, and on the outside who's kind of after Ward, and is there potential for guys moving around? I'm working ahead a little bit here.

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, Nick Neimann is out there and he's done a good job, and I think he's got some temperament that we like, and we see some good things out of him, so we're really pleased with his progress, and can he jump inside and play inside? Maybe. But I think even when you say just for the starting row, I think you can put Ben maybe inside. We'll look at that. I think Jones maybe can play Mike. So we've been mixing these guys up sometimes, and you've got to remember, hey, this guy is in here at Mike and this guy is at Will, so some of it's not all going to be perfect because there's definitely different reads. I mean, if you're a Mike or you're a Will backer, yeah, they're both inside backers at times, but obviously you're getting different looks.

When they've got different schemes, they don't play as fast, and it's just like seeing flashcards of really what kind of play is it, you've got to diagnose it within a second and make sure you know where you're going. I think this is a good week to -- what we've been doing, trying to switch some guys in and out of that and giving those guys have been playing a lot some rest.

Q. How do you inject a little more stuff into the

blitz? I know the argument you have there is probably is it worth giving up something, an opening to the back.

PHIL PARKER: There's always a trade-off, and obviously we've been hurt for a long time, and we're a bend-but-don't-break type of defense, and I think when you get down in the red zone and you can hold those guys to three points, you're doing well, which obviously paid off in the Penn State game as far as giving up points. I think there's times and places, and it depends on the down and distance. You get 3rd down and 3, 3rd down and 2, really there's not much you can do. 3rd down and 1, you want to bring it, a run stopper, that's great. If you start getting down 3rd down and 7 and 8, you might want to try to bring some more a little bit of pressure, make him make a decision, play tight coverage, and then sometimes you get back when it's 3rd down and real long, it all depends where you're at in the game. Sometimes that might be the best time to bring it all because they've got to get rid of the ball fast.

You kind of weigh all those judgments when you're going through a game and where you're at and how you feel your guys are covering and how they're switching maybe formations, are they trade shifting motion and stuff like that? Are we going to be able to adjust to all that stuff? That's been one thing that's always stuck in my mind, let's make sure we know what we're doing in our assignment.

Q. What percentage would you say you guys blitz?

PHIL PARKER: I don't know exactly, probably about 10 percent or something like that right now, but we're usually 17 to 19 percent. We blitzed 4th and 1 or something like that and we give up a touchdown at Iowa State, but then the next time we came back 4th and 3 against Wyoming, we run the same blitz, and it's minus two. It's a guessing game. You've got to keep them guessing.

Q. Speaking of which, with Bo's experience and with Josey's experience, do you ever want to trade off between the Will and the Mike?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, we've done that. We haven't advertised it, but we've done that, just kind of switch it up. Sometimes we play right and left, and so this guy has to be the Leo. There's been times, and as a matter of fact in the Wyoming game -- you guys probably didn't notice it, but we kind of switched their responsibility, and one really was the Leo and one was the Will. But it's just our adjustment where nobody is seeing it, so one guy -- Bo was playing outside backer, the Leo backer, and then we have -- sometimes we have Ben Neimann in the box, so he's like a Will backer. So it all depends what formation, it's FSL, formations on the sideline, so they're getting that reps anyway. They're getting some looks, but sometimes

we do switch them around.

Q. How close would you say that trio is to being the three seniors you had in 2013?

PHIL PARKER: Three are still playing, right, three of them were in camp, so -- I don't know if they're -- it's hard to say that. I think the aggressiveness of Josey, I think he's very comparable to a Pat Angerer type of guy, really impressed with him, and Ben Neimann has done a great job. He can play in space like Kirksey. I don't think he is Kirksey. And I think Bo is a good go to work guy, get things done guy like James Morris.