

Vrbo Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs Kentucky

Saturday, January 1, 2022

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



you know, I mean, it's not a new story, but in football, those little things really add up to make a difference. And that's really kind of how it shook out.

Our guys were good at halftime. I think they realized we could do things better. I thought we did things better for the most part in the second half. Credit to Kentucky. They got the stop when they needed to, and then they converted those plays on that last possession, and we came up short.

It's just a tough day for our guys, but just proud of this football team, this 2021 version.

Q. One of the bright spots was the rushing game today. What in your eyes did you see went right about that, especially when you were already without Tyler Goodson?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think, as I've indicated for a while, we really have felt good about our depth chart. Getting Ivory back was a bonus. We weren't counting on that a month ago or even two weeks ago, so that was a bonus for us.

We have been impressed with Gavin and Leshon. Gavin has played some. Thought he did a great job today. Ran hard and ran tough. Leshon, really proud of him. I thought he stepped up and played really well. So happy about that.

It's tough for Ivory. Wish we had him back for another year. We all wish he was part of our team. But I can't say enough about what he's done on the field and off. He's a tremendous young person. And like all our seniors, wish him the best.

Also, I'd add, I feel like our line has matured as we've gone along. Not there yet, but that showed a little bit today, too, against a big front there, missing a guy. But they have got some big, physical guys, and I thought we showed growth again today. So that's encouraging.

Q. You just alluded to the offensive line, and I'm assuming that's part of the answer you'll give to this, but what do you want to see from the offense in the future that you didn't have this year and like today in a 17-point game?

Kentucky 20, Iowa 17

KIRK FERENTZ: So, you know, heck of a football game. We knew coming in it was going to be a tough, physical, competitive game. Kentucky has a good team, veteran team and very physical team, so congratulations to them, Coach Stoops and everybody involved with their program.

Just really proud of our guys. They fought right to the end. We didn't play well enough to win and left some things out there certainly, but that's in part credit to Kentucky and just something we've got to work through here.

I thought the guys came back and really played a great second half, and we came up short. So again, very, very proud of our guys. I've been saying all season long, this is a very special football team. It's been really an honor to work with these guys. It's the last game for this football team, and so it's been an honor to work with them; I think speaking on behalf of our entire staff that way.

What I just got done telling those guys, fought to the end, to the last whistle and expected it to go down to the end. Can be really proud, to have a 10-win season is special, and just have done a great, great job.

Again, really proud of our guys. Sorry to come up short today, but just really proud and especially of the seniors. It was a great senior class, and certainly appreciate all their efforts, all they have done, not only this season but over the course of their careers. So wish them all the best moving forward. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Right down to the wire, even though you didn't win the game today, what do you feel like was the high point of your team, what did they do the best and what encourages you most going into next season?

KIRK FERENTZ: We left opportunities out there, especially in the first half. It's a little bit disappointing. And,



KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, obviously we have to score more points, and we are well aware of that. You know, that's part of the next couple months here, this coming month, or this month, I should say, present month, be focused mostly on recruiting.

But our guys get back at the end of the month, and we'll start working towards next year. And once we get we get off the road from recruiting, that's when we get introspective and study things we're doing and look at things we need to do.

I felt like we have been gaining ground, and the line is a good reference point there. I think we have been gaining ground. We are going to lose some good players, but we have to keep moving other guys forward just like you do each and every year.

I don't think there's any magic answers right now. Just a couple conversions here and there, that type of thing, and it's a really fine line. We've got to keep pushing.

Q. A couple questions on the fourth and inches decision there at the end. Can you walk me through your thought process? Obviously first down, you can run out most of the clock.

KIRK FERENTZ: Pretty simple for me. Felt like I like our odds. Perfect world you like to get the ball inside the 20, but even with the ball, they had 80 yards, and I don't know if they had a time-out -- they didn't at that point.

I liked our odds, and we played those odds. Retrospect, a lot of things you do it over. But I felt comfortable with where we're at. Obviously we'd rather have converted on third down.

Q. Was not having Linderbaum on the field maybe a part that --

KIRK FERENTZ: No, not at all. Not at all.

Q. Was there an option to fake that? Looked like you had a weird formation off the punt.

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, we were just trying to drum up -- that's all we were trying to do, and the earlier fourth down, we thought they were off-sides, at least to our thought, the guy had hit his helmet before the ball gets snapped, so just taking a shot at that.

Q. Wanted to ask about Keagan Johnson; didn't seem to be in uniform, but he was down here. Was there a reason why he didn't play?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I thought we released that information. Apparently we didn't or didn't get out. Trainers got a call about 3:30 in the morning, and I have not heard a report what it is. Could be kidney stones. Might be an appendix. But he had a tough early morning, if you will, and as far as I know, he's doing fine. But have not heard a final diagnosis.

So tremendous young guy. Just unfortunate he couldn't be here for his first Bowl.

Q. Can you talk about the defense, how they adjusted early on? Kentucky went right down the field against you guys, and they seemed to figure things out.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, just seems sometimes it takes us a little while to get settled in and get a feel of the game and what have you, and it certainly felt that way in that first possession. Defensive guys do a great job. There's good communication, players and coaches, and I think one thing about having some continuity in our system, at least we know where to tinker when you have to tinker.

So I thought we made some good adjustments, and you know, made some good red zone stops, I think twice in that first half, which kept us in the game. And then the other thing in that first half, we had that red zone opportunity and, you know, couldn't come up with a touchdown. Those kinds of things really weigh into what goes on, but the guys came back the second half and just kept playing. Gave ourselves a chance.

Q. Can you explain the emotions of the roller coaster that was the final seven, ten minutes of that game for you and your team?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you know, seems to be we get in a lot of games like this where it just goes right down to the last 15 minutes, five minutes, whatever, and it's one more of those. You just try to stay focused on what's going on and what's in front of you, and you know, again, perfect world, we convert the first down when we ended up punting the thing and you'd like to think you get the stop.

And you have to give Kentucky a lot of credit, too. They put us in that fourth and less than one, and they took the ball and were able to drive it and came up with some big plays. And No. 1 is part of it. He's a really good player. The quarterback is a really good player and a lot of respect for him, and their whole team. It's a good program.

It's hard. It's hard. The ups and downs are challenging.

Q. Speaking about Wan'Dale Robinson, how difficult is

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it to defend him even though you know they don't have a lot of other receivers they are going to get the ball to; he gets so many of their targets?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's just a really explosive, dynamic football player, and he's tough to keep up with. The interference play, I think it was in the fourth quarter, too, I think, wasn't it? We were trying to get hands on him, and that's not easy. He ended up having a crack there in the back end.

So he's a really good football player. He was good when we faced him last time, and he's probably better right now and that comes with age. We've got a lot of respect for him.

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SAM LaPORTA: Good group of guys led by our seniors. Was a tough way for them to go out today. And I think the team showed a lot of character today, and we fought our butts off. Not the way we wanted to go out, but you can't fault our effort or our toughness I'd say.

Q. Can you talk about --

SAM LaPORTA: Yeah, we talked about it a little bit. We set it up throughout the game. I basically got escorted into the end zone. I didn't get touched until I got down there. That's a credit to the big guys hustling down the field. It's not easy. It's been a long game, third quarter, fourth quarter, whatever that was, for them to bust their butts and get down the field for me, I appreciate that.

Q. Sam, in the second half, you guys seemed to really be rolling offensively; what helped you guys establish that and move forward?

SAM LaPORTA: Obviously, you know, with the 15-minute halftime, we got to draw everything up over the break, and we kind of got to talk a little bit more and communicate the looks and what we're going to get and how we were going to approach the second half.

Felt like we executed a little bit, and I think our -- I think our conditioning and our preparation definitely helped with that. I felt like we had an edge there for a little bit. Yeah, and then things were rolling for us. We were converting a lot of third downs, making the easy plays. So, yeah, just got rolling there for a while.

Q. There were some young players stepping into big roles, especially, Gavin and Leshon. What did you see out of them stepping into a big role for the first time?

SAM LaPORTA: It's really cool to see those guys step for

us when they need it most. They have been working hard all season, and it doesn't surprise me the efforts they showed today because we see it every day in practice. They work hard like everybody else. And over time we develop guys, and they were ready to hit the spotlight today and they ran their butts off, and we're really excited about them.

Q. What was your reaction to seeing somebody as durable as Tyler go down in the fourth quarter with that injury, and have you talked to him since with how he's doing?

SAM LaPORTA: No, I haven't. Obviously I was out there for the two-minute drive. He's one tough son of a gun. You can't take him out of the fight. He was the rock in the center of that offense the entire year, and he was our leader out there. And it was really tough to see him go down. We tried to bounce back for that first drive, and we got that three and out, which was really tough. He was the core of the guys, and you can't fault his toughness.

Q. When did you know that Spencer was going to start, and what did you think of his performance today?

SAM LaPORTA: Spencer, he competed his butt off today. We have worked really hard all week and all of Bowl prep. They were a great team of course. They had some obstacles that we had to work around, and I thought Spencer commanded the offense really well today.

You can fault him on a couple interceptions, I guess, but we don't. It's a team effort. There's 11 guys out there. You can say what you want about him, but he's a competitor and he's tough as heck.

Q. What would be the one thing that you want to see the offense work on in the off-season and spring ball? What do you think you guys need to work on?

SAM LaPORTA: I think there's a lot of things that we can work on. Starting with me individually, I mean, but then to the team as a whole, we have to be a little bit more consistent. We went backwards a couple times today



which is really hard it overcome, especially when you have those long third downs and things like that. Negative plays are always a drive stopper, so, I mean, we can always try to work on that. Obviously consistency is the key. It's a game of inches, so can't go backwards.

Q. What were the emotions of the final couple of minutes like where you have the elation of feeling you're about to win the Citrus Bowl and then it goes the other way? What was that like?

SAM LaPORTA: It's a big swing of emotions. It's really tough, especially when you feel like you're going to come out on top, and then the offense always tries to stay locked in, especially when the defense is out there and there's a possibility that they could call on us for a two-minute drive or some like that.

The emotions are really high and then low and somewhere in between. You try to stay level-headed as best as you can. Yeah, it's just a big swing of emotions.

Q. I know obviously you're coming off an emotional game just now, but as far as the NFL Draft goes, have you thought about that at this stage of the game for you?

SAM LaPORTA: I've really been focused on the Bowl prep these last three weeks. That's something to look towards, I guess, in the future. I'll consult my family with that decision, of course, and then make the best decision based off of that.

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