

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



COACH FERENTZ: I want to take this opportunity and recap the 2017 season a little bit before we move forward and turn our focus on to the coming year.

First of all, just really pleased for our team, our program, and certainly our fans about winning the game in the Pinstripe bowl against Boston College. Bowl wins are tough, they're challenging, obviously bowl games are challenging, we play a good team and certainly that was the case with Boston College.

Really proud of our guys the way they rallied in the second half. Doing the things we had to do at halftime to get a few things straightened out and most importantly playing hard-nosed opportunistic football in the second half and finding a way to finish the win and finish the season on a high note. Happy about that and happy for our seniors, they did a great job from start to finish and helped us get the win in this ballgame certainly.

So it's great for them to leave with that kind of memory on their ledgers.

I think in a lot of ways the Pinstripe game was really representative of our season. We played really tough smart physical football in that second half, but we had some ups and downs during the course of the ballgame as you know. And you think about the success we had against Ohio State, certainly Nebraska, that included the Penn State game, too, it was a heck of a football game and there were other times where we didn't play as clean, didn't play as smart as we needed to and didn't play as well.

So it just kind of was a blend of both those things, and if you look at the entire season right now, there's always ebb and flow with every season.

And I think everything with the way we won the bowl game is really representative of what we need to do to have success certainly, and hopefully that win will give us a good jolt of energy as we head into the out of season program now and spring and then next fall after that.

So the end of the season means it's tough to say goodbye to our seniors. I talked about those guys, did a great job, gave us leadership and certainly showed

the other guys how to do things.

In addition, we're really sorry to lose a couple of other team members who did a great job, James Daniels and Josh Jackson both had tremendous seasons tremendous careers here. And we're going to miss them and Tyler Wieggers, same thing. Wish all of them great success in the future. I know they will do a nice job, no question about that.

Going back and looking at a couple of things real quickly, just a couple of thumbnail sketches, defensively I think we did a lot of good things this year. Certainly to have our points per game average under 20 points, that's significant.

And happy about that. Things we need to probably really address right now first we're losing some tremendous players, just mentioned Josh. Nate Bazata up front and obviously four senior linebackers that played well on special teams and played well on defense. That's a concern. I think we can improve our run defense. That certainly wasn't maybe as stout as we'd like it this year.

And the other thing, just talking about being more opportunistic when we get an opportunity, and some of these things showed up in the bowl game, if we get a chance to pin the team back inside their inside their 10 yard line, taking advantage of those opportunities so we can flip field position.

Offensively we saw some good things there and at times we really flashed and did some good things and took advantage of our personnel pretty wisely.

But on the list of things that we have to address certainly it starts with ball security, we had the ball loose way too many times. Did a good job in the passing game that way. But as far as touching the ball, that ball was out there way too much.

Our overall consistency on fundamental and basic play. Again you look at the bowl game, look at that tape and you'll see a lot of things that are correctible and improvable.

And this is probably true in every segment but mostly on the offensive side, our football awareness, there are

times, again, you just look at the bowl game -- I'm thinking of exactly of one snap right now where our football awareness, we started out okay and just lose sight or lose focus and end up giving a sack uncontested that is not a good thing.

So a couple of things on the list there. We'll get into more detail as the out-of-season progresses but those are things that jump out.

Special teams, not to neglect that, obviously our punting game has to improve. We didn't have the kind of consistency with the punt game. It really is kind of comparable to where our kicking game was, our place kicking game was in the spring. It wasn't good enough. And our punting game would be in that regard.

I think our returners did a nice job, but now we're going to lose some guys and need to come up with replacements. I think we have guys on campus that have that opportunity. But it's not something that we want to forget about.

And then just overall and kind of ties in with what I talked about with the defense, just doing a better job creating better field position, taking advantage of field position.

There are way too many times, and it ties into the punting game, you have a chance to put the ball down inside the 20 and we can't do that successfully. Or we end up punting it to the 18, 19, something like that. We've got to do a better job in those areas if we're going to be a championship level football team.

Those are some things that stand out to me.

Moving forward, really excited about the guys we have coming back. And again hoping that as this thing goes on, part of the fun of coaching is to see how guys handle each and every step. And that work will begin here in the near future.

We'll have our guys back here on campus next Tuesday. Out-of-season program begins on Wednesday, and that's the next phase that our players are looking at.

So, we'll work on recruiting. That's ongoing. That never is ending anymore. I was telling a couple guys I talked to in the NFL that we're thinking about getting back into college. I said that's one thing you might want to consider.

That never stops. Okay. So the recruiting part and obviously we got some things to do to finish this class out. The winter program is coming up right there. Spring ball will be right after that. Transition into the

summer program, preseason. And next thing you know it will be 2000 -- or September, 1, we're going to be opening up against Northern Illinois.

Really excited about what's in front of us. Really proud of the guys last year. And with that I'll open it up to questions.

Q. Losing James Daniels, he played such a key role in that line?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, as you might imagine, I knew that was a possibility, at least thought it would be a possibility, and I'll say this about James: I don't know if I've ever coached a more talented center prospect. That includes my time in the NFL.

He's got some skills that are just really unusual. And he's a really intelligent guy. And one interesting thing about him, you get the feedback from the NFL folks. That's strictly off film. They haven't had a chance to investigate the kind of person he is and his intelligence.

All those things, kind of the personality he's got. So I think both in his case and Josh's case, those things are just going to elevate their status.

It was a realistic possibility that he may make this decision. And so obviously we've got Keegan Render is our next man in at that position. Cole (Banwart) worked there. Spencer (Williams). So, we've got a couple of guys rotating.

That's what the next four months or five months, six months, seven months are about -- trying to figure out who will be ready when September comes around.

Q. Are you saying that James is ready for this?

COACH FERENTZ: No question. I think both these guys, they had a good decision. Again, I was on record last year saying I think it would have been detrimental to Akrum to go out last year, I really believe that. I think it better served him to be here a year. I'll say this, I think it's better for any player, quite frankly, I think they're more mature, more NFL-ready, if you will.

But James is a hell of a developmental prospect, if you will. In my mind he could go and play guard for anybody next year, just about anybody in the league, maybe not anybody. But he's that kind of player. And Josh is a really good player, too.

I could have said the same thing about Scherff and Reiff and Bulaga did that, so whatever.

Q. Now, you're replacing Sean Welsh, probably your best lineman. Can you talk about one of your most highly touted --

COACH FERENTZ: That's college football. Sean, you're talking about versatility, what Sean did for us. He played everything and played a little center, too.

We took that off his plate. But really he's done a tremendous job. So that's college football. That's a hard thing when you graduate guys, whether it be linebacker, guys like Sean, that's part of the process.

But with that, it creates opportunity for new players. And there's no better story -- I kind of teed that one up for you guys, with Josh Jackson back in August. That's the neat thing about it, to see who is going to rise and who is going to make that step forward.

Q. Looking at that position then, across the board, offensive line, your goal is always to get the best five out there. Do you anticipate right now, if you had to play on Saturday, that Render would probably be your center and then be moved with Ross Reynolds and Paulsen is inside?

COACH FERENTZ: If we played this Saturday for sure mainly because Banwart is hurt. Keegan got the majority of the work. Keegan is the most game-ready, if you will. And that was our plan in any game; he would have been the guy to slide in. Ross would have slid up to guard.

So if we were playing this Saturday, but there are so many things that can happen between now and September. That's the fun part, just to see who is going to do what.

I'll say this about Cole -- he's demonstrated the traits that we're looking for, not only as a center but just for a guy that is going to play out there.

So can he do it or not? We'll find out this spring. But I think he's demonstrated he's coachable. He's a really dedicated guy and really serious about what he does. Great work ethic. I think he's got an opportunity.

Q. At the Pinstripe Bowl, Mark Kallenberger was working as second team at left tackle. I know that was break glass in case of emergency, and probably you'd move the tight end before he breaks his redshirt. But does he fit into those? Is he going to be competing for one of the five slots?

COACH FERENTZ: I think so. I mean he worked a lot with the two's this year. He's on scout team as well. We had him go back and forth. But he wasn't standing around watching. He was doing things.

Physically he's probably not there yet for obvious reasons; he just got out of high school. But he's got the traits we're looking for, too. He's a really competitive guy, tough-minded and doesn't back down

from anything. So he's got a lot of work to do. But, yeah, we really like him.

Q. What's it say about an offensive lineman to go from two-, three-year starting seniors (indiscernible) to freshman at tackle? Had to have been some misses?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know about that. That wasn't the plan. That plan was to have our guys out there. And it's funny, if you look year to year, I still go back to 2002, one of the reasons we had a really successful team that year is, I think, we had one guy get hurt -- I think D.J. Johnson is the only one that missed really significant time.

When you can add that kind of -- we would have been a different team with Ike and Boone out there. And I say it with all due respect to the players that played, but especially at that position, when you have guys that have been around a little bit. And just, I told you, when Boone hugged me during the Ohio State game, after the game was over, like -- I lose sight of how big and strong some of these guys are, the maturity. But he wasn't that way five years ago.

That's what you lose out on. But with that being said, guys we had out there were capable and I'm really excited, again, just going back to that bowl film. You watch the film. There's so many things technically we can do better but that's experience, it's not just the maturity part but experience and repetition.

And you see clips of those guys really blocking good players well. Then you see too many where they need -- that's the challenge. That's the race that all players run, you know how technically proficient can they become and really good at what they're asked to do, because we're not typically going to line up and beat them in a combine. We can't do that. So we've gotta do it with consistency. And I think that's really our offensive challenge. But I liked all three guys that played tackle for us after the other two guys were out.

Q. Talking with Brian after the season on some games last year the offense struggled. But, we do what we do, you say that a lot. Is that in need of examination when you have instances like 66 yards in one game? Is that a red flag for you?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I'll go back to Arizona State in '02. Excuse me, '04. Doesn't get any worse than that. Well it does get worse. It got worse back in November here.

But the week before we looked pretty good offensively. So some of the things we're doing are okay. And I would say it's more about just -- that was the game, I think every game is a separate entity, me personally.

We played a really good defensive team who is being coached by a guy that wasn't a millionaire, their defensive coordinator and their defensive staff. And they don't have a lot of five-star recruits but those guys play good defense and they ran the whole season this year and ended up, I don't know where they're at nationally but I'm sure it's top five. They can play defense.

We didn't play well enough offensively so it was just a bad mix. And what made it worse in that game was our defense gave us a chance because we came up with some plays in that game defensively that gave us a chance to be in the game.

But that was not a good day for us and that's one we'll study hard during the out-of-season.

Q. There was a couple of instances. Was it just the youth on the line of scrimmage or --

COACH FERENTZ: I think that's a big part of it. Certainly, if you don't block consistently enough, yeah, that's a big part of it. We had a first-year quarterback playing, too. But I thought he did a lot of good things. Kodak moment for me is the ball coming out of his hand against Wyoming and Michigan State, and those are things that he'll have to clean up.

I think another step he's got to make is learning when to pull it down and run. It's not something he did very well this year. But that's something experience will teach you. And it's probably part of the reason I'm really excited about next year.

I think we've got a lot of good young guys that played pretty well for the most part this year against good competition. But they've got a lot of room for improvement. And if we're doing our job and they're doing their job it will happen.

Q. Did you see kind of enough from Wirfs to really think about left tackle for him?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, left tackle thing is not quite as sacred as everybody makes it out to be. It's like you're the anointed one or the chosen one if you play that.

It's important, don't get me wrong, but I think both tackle positions are really important, but fundamentally they're both the same.

So I think Tristan and A.J. both are capable of playing out there. That's a good thing. I think Kallenberger down the road will be too. We've got three guys in-house that can probably play that position, and I'm not so sure Levi can't play tackle on the right side. That's what I was referring to. When he does it right, I can

show you pictures of him doing it right and it looks pretty good, and then show you some pictures where it doesn't look so good.

But I think it shows he's capable. It's not just a matter of him refining and becoming consistent. That's going to be true of all the guys.

Q. With Wiegers leaving, are you comfortable with your quarterback depth now?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, again, we talked about James as a possibility. As Josh's season evolved, became a distinct possibility that he may leave. And certainly Tyler Weigers, Tyler Weiger's, situation, I look at like Cody's and Jake's a couple of years back where I don't foresee that as a selfish move at all. I think quarterbacks are a unique discussion to me personally. When they transfer.

It's probably a good thing sometimes because we haven't had a better kid in our program in 19 years than Tyler Weigers. What a tremendous young man, tremendous family. He's done everything we've asked him to do and I can't tell you all the things he does, work-wise, like extra work that I've seen him do and he does a lot of stuff, as do a lot of our players, I don't see everything obviously. But I'm not like Santa Claus.

So I'm happy for him. I'm really excited. I hope he has a great year, and I think he will.

Q. With the tenth assistant, what is your plan to utilize that person and then what's your timetable for that?

COACH FERENTZ: As you might know. Or imagine. We had a plan in place. At least kicking something around. And looked like it was going to take place last year. I can't remember when it was going to be. Was it spring? I don't know.

So we had a plan in place. And pretty much it just got pushed back. So I think I know where we're going on this whole thing, but I also think there's no compelling reason to pull the trigger right now or make a decision.

So we'll tread water here for a little bit and just see what the landscape looks like and probably do something here mid-month, late month, somewhere in that ballpark, possibly, early February. And we'll go from there.

Q. Is LeVar going to be your special teams coach exclusively?

COACH FERENTZ: That's part of the plan. That's part of the plan that I announced last year to see him transitioning into that role and free Seth up to more defensively more quality time on the defense, which

he's kind of been doing two jobs and so I think that will help fortify the efforts in the defensive room, just give him one thing to concentrate on. I think it will help our special teams and I thought LeVar did a great job with that transition this year, he was tremendous. Seems really comfortable in that role.

Seems like that's a really good niche for him, and so, yeah, I'm really excited about that. I think it's going to be a good thing.

Q. Does it have to be a defensive coach?

COACH FERENTZ: Not necessarily. We've got an open mind. We'll see where it goes. Truth is you probably can do it with -- I think you can do it with fine with nine coaches me personally. But I think we also need more help not so much from the football part. You get too many people in football you get everything screwed up.

But just all the stuff that we've gotta do. Recruiting is a huge part of it. And then making sure our players are doing what they're supposed to be doing, too, that's more than full time.

Q. What about a player like Josh, a guy who lost that third cornerback spot last year and all of a sudden jumps into a starting role ties the school record for interceptions have you ever seen something like that before where this could take one year and he's making that jump?

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't thought it out completely but without thinking much about it, pardon me for not thinking it out, but I just haven't. It's like to me the Brad Banks story in some ways. Brad Banks had one offer coming out as a quarterback. I think NC State offered him as a receiver. He's not that fast.

He had one quarterback offer. Ends up being AP player of the year, runner up to Heisman, Big Ten player all that stuff. I think it's one of the greatest stories ever.

But to your point. Rugamba beat Josh out. Rugamba played not Josh. I told you two years ago you saw him competing getting better and better great work ethic and attitude.

I thought he was going to play well this year but I'm not going to stand up here and tell you he's going to be on that wall up there, that's hard to be up there when people throw terms up there, it's hard to get on that wall. For him to play the way he did. But the best part is, most of those guys up there, have to find somebody as an exception. Those are our best guys, too. They're not only really good players, those guys are like stellar guys and don't come better than Josh.

Tremendous young man.

Q. You talked about a lot of experience some of the younger guys got on the field this season. What do you think is going to be a position group or a facet of the game you think you'll need to lean on early in 2018 as you get things going?

COACH FERENTZ: I'd say up front on both sides. But started the defense because we're losing those linebackers. They're not coming back. All four of those guys had great careers.

So we're going to be young there and really inexperienced. And so we've got to sandwich it on both sides. But that's an area. And then to Mark's point earlier. I'm counting on our offensive line to take a big step. We're losing two really good players for sure. But we've got a lot of guys coming back now that are going to be more in the flow of things and kind of ties in with our staff. We're basically a new offensive staff last year starting in February, mid-February. So by the time we get everybody hired and in place.

I'm really excited. I think we have the potential to take a big step in that whole enterprise. So but I think improvement up front will get us there. And can't guarantee it but I'm confident that it's going to happen.

Q. Running back order in your head?

COACH FERENTZ: It's pretty short right now. Flip a coin. You've got Toren and Ivory. So those are the two guys. So that's where it all starts. Those two guys are really, I talked about Josh. Toren is a really, really impressive young man. I think he's going to play really well for us. And Ivory has already shown some really good things. That's where it's at and we'll have to develop more depth there for sure.

Q. When you look at defensive line, the depth and the depth you have returning the talent you have returning, it's kind of close to what you had maybe in 2010 with Clayborn and Daniels and those guys. Do you see that as maybe the strength if not your defense potentially your team?

COACH FERENTZ: Two thoughts on that. First of all, the guy we're losing is the ring leader of that group like he gives us toughness and grit up there. To me Nate personifies that. So we're losing a really good player but we're also losing a guy that just quietly pulls them all in.

And I'm not saying that -- I could say the same thing about Parker, Parker is that kind of guy, too. So we've got two pretty nitty-gritty guys right there.

I would -- they're not the same as the offensive line but it's similar in that to me we can make a lot of

improvement up front. Those guys, their best football is still way ahead of them. I think that's a good thing.

And we're going to need it. Because we really aren't that deep in my mind. It's not I wouldn't put them in that category out of '09, 2010 group. They were salty. 2004.

Q. Is Alaric back in good standing?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's still got some things to do. In fact he was in the weight room this morning. Saw him down there looks good and is back from break and all that stuff. We've got a few things that he'll have to check off the list here as we go along but hopefully it's straight ahead.

I anticipate the same thing with Brandon. It's going to be ongoing for those guys to get back where they need to be and hopefully in the near future that will be the case.

Q. How will you approach the backup quarterback situation?

COACH FERENTZ: It's wide open. Wide open.

Q. And Spencer is coming in?

COACH FERENTZ: Today is Wednesday. He'll be here tomorrow night.

Q. As far as the Indianapolis players that didn't announce, are they with the team right now the two guys that signed letters?

COACH FERENTZ: If I didn't announce them I guess I'm not supposed to still. I don't know.

Q. They're not signed with the team?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, their status is the same as it was back on signing day, I'll just say that.

Q. Your fans are going to burn this place down?

COACH FERENTZ: My obligation is more to our players than it is to our fans. I love our fans. I'm not trying to be disrespectful there. But if players have requests, I try to honor them, if they're reasonable. Not all requests, obviously. No, you can't have ice cream every night, I'm sorry.

Q. Any other injuries prop up after --

COACH FERENTZ: I can just tell you Matt Nelson, you saw he got injured in the second half. He won't be out there for spring practice. He'll be fine and is fine.

But as far as I know everybody else will be eligible for spring practice. So sorry about that one, obviously.

Q. Anyone else inform you that they're going to leave besides Clayberg and Weigers?

COACH FERENTZ: Not at this point that I'm aware of. Not that I'm aware of. And I'll say this about Noah. Noah is a tremendous young guy I skipped over that back in December. But great young man. Just wasn't working for him, I think.

And he's a tremendous young guy. And kind of made me rethink whatever we call it the gray shirt thing, like I'm not so sure that's a great deal. I think it's better for players to come in be in the flow of things instead of having to be outside looking in I'm not so sure that's a great idea and other people have probably done better with it. But there's something about being part of a team.

Q. The linebackers, what do you expect for after losing three?

COACH FERENTZ: It's wide open also. Part of December was looking at our entire roster. It's one nice thing about a bowl it really gives you a chance to look at things top to bottom. And I can tell you right now in my mind at least nobody's emerged. We have some favorites and all that kind of stuff but we'll let that stuff get decided over the next six to eight months.

And I wouldn't even want to predict who is going to line up where for the first ballgame. But it's obviously going to be something we look at closely. It's wide open competition for everybody right now including anybody that comes in.

Q. Where do you think you'll be at recruiting-wise, I think you're at 19 now.

COACH FERENTZ: We've still got a few more to go. I think we've got a decent pool right now of guys we're looking at. And I would imagine over the next two weeks might come up on some other stuff that might be interesting to consider. And there are a couple of positions we still need to address and then I think the other thing we need to do as a staff is to make sure that we're kind of like the draft, sometimes who is the best guy available.

It might not be exactly the need you have right now. But if there's a really good player out there that's interested in us, can we find a way to get them into the class.

So those are some of the discussions we'll probably be having in the next couple of weeks. And so the next three weeks here we'll be looking at who is out there. And we'll also be spring recruiting. This stuff is all sliding forward now.

So they took head coaches off the road in spring recruiting, right? Doors open now again in January. Isn't it? Funny how it goes, everything is going to keep racing forward. I don't know how you contain it. But

that's a topic for discussion for smart people at a convention maybe they figured out something down there when they were down there. I missed it.

Q. You get earlier on official visits now this year. Is that good? Is that something --

COACH FERENTZ: I'm in favor of it but I'm not in favor I think we have an eight month window, right. I did talk to a couple of other coaches about that who think it's insane as well.

My preference would have been just to have it in June because our Junes they got shot three, four years ago, June is a free for all. And to me it might have been a smart thing to do to contain it since Junes are already ruined, just make it the month of June. In our wisdom we're doing it March, April, May, June. You know better than I.

That's going to be a little bit of a poker game. Do you use an offer now or official visit, all that kind of stuff. It's kind of like in-season visits.

So we've talked about it and we'll continue to talk about it. Me personally I think that's a bad move just like I think early signing probably should be in August. So everybody can make up their minds if they know where they're going, do it. If you don't, just go back to recruiting as normal. But nobody is asking my opinion. I'll give it to you.

Q. Wide receiver, Matt VandeBerg, four, five years, where do you think the position stands? You had two guys played a lot, Smith played a little. Where do you think it stands right now?

COACH FERENTZ: Clearly we had an issue there going into the season. And so Matt was a big part of that. Easley was a big part of that and thank goodness for Nick and Ihmir did a nice job and Brandon played some.

It's like anything, things don't just happen overnight and Marc talked about attrition and stuff like that. That's a position where, losing Jay Sheel, hurt us a couple year ago. Long story short, we're still working on that and we're going to lose Matt. That's a big loss, obviously. Good football player, good leader. Counting on Nick stepping up and Ihmir should be a better player and Brandon will have to be a better play and we'll keep working down the list. But we've got to continue to get better at that position. And just gotta work it. Massage it a little bit and work it and utilize our tight ends.

Fortunately I think we've got some good players at tight end. Two that you saw this year. I think Shaun Beyer is one of the guys that's improved more than anybody or as much as anybody put it that way in December.

So we've got to really just be open minded that way and try to keep mixing things a little bit.

Q. Did Golston come in the last snap of the Pinstripe Bowl, I don't think he had a snap all year?

COACH FERENTZ: That's probably true. Yeah. Mop up or whatever. But, yeah. Guys on the farm club I think has an opportunity to play. He needs to play for us and should play. He's been here two years now.

And those are guys you look at the guys in that second class right now. Cedric. The Paulsen's, offensively. A.J. Those guys need to be -- this is where they need to start. And again our guys aren't, we don't have Alabama's guys. When we play young guys like they've got to be -- they've got to try to get there by their fourth year, fifth year. Third year would be okay, too, if they played by their third year. That's kind of the push we're trying to make with those guys and Chauncey is certainly in that class.