

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Before we talk about spring football, I want to take a minute and publicly congratulate Coach Fry. He was acknowledged this weekend by the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame with the Legends Award down in Dallas.

I think when you think about the word legend, it gets thrown around a lot in sports and other areas as well, and I think it's a lot of times just overused. When it comes to Coach Fry, it truly is a fitting description, I think, of the kind of person he is and the kind of coach he is. Most importantly the impact he's had on the University of Iowa.

So on behalf of everybody involved in our program, I want to, again, congratulate Coach Fry, and say this personally, he's been extremely impactful on me in my life, not only as a person, but also as a football coach. So just very appreciative for everything that he's done for us and for the entire program here.

So it's good to be here to talk about spring football. Coincidentally, first day of spring, so I guess that wasn't planned, but it kind of happened that way. Spring football practice is always one of the favorite times of the year for us as coaches. It's a real opportunity for us right now to learn more about who we are as a team, and maybe more importantly what kind of football team we hopefully can become. It all starts with a commitment from our players, our coaches, our staff towards winning a Big Ten Championship, and that's certainly not easy to do.

So we've gone through one phase, now we're getting ready to start the next phase of work. For the next five weeks we'll have three practices a week. It's really a great opportunity to see how much our experienced players can improve, how much they can grow.

Then the other part is it gives us a chance to really see if the younger players, guys that haven't been out there in the heat of competition, how quickly they can get ready to compete in Kinnick on game day. So couple different races going on all the time.

The bottom line, it's going to take a lot of hard work and a lot of enthusiasm by everybody to pull things together. From our younger guys, our incoming

players, and our seniors. So it's always a good time of year.

This is my 20th year now as head coach. As I think you know, 29th year at Iowa total. One thing that really hasn't changed, this is really the purest time for a football coach. It's just about teaching, teaching the fundamentals, the basics. Basically just teaching guys how to play football, the basics and fundamentals.

I really feel good about the way our staff has come together. Last year we had a significant amount of change, especially on the offensive side, and a little addition this year with Derrick joining the group. I think the guys have really functioned well and I feel good about the whole staff, the way it's coordinated and the way things are working together.

Then beyond that, I think our team has done a good job thus far since they've gotten back in January, going through the winter phase of the program. Chris Doyle and his staff do a great job each and every year of getting the guys ready through that segment, and I think the numbers bear that out. They did a nice job in terms of their testing before break.

So we're off to a good start there. Now the trick is to continue it on here the next five weeks and see what we can do building-wise that way.

I think also, the last thing just to mention, you'll appreciate what's going to happen in the future. You always look back a little bit and look at some of the guys that have left our program this past year, bunch of great seniors, and a couple guys that declared for the draft.

So we're very appreciative of their efforts. All the things they did during their time on campus. All you have to do is look over at the wall here. You get two new additions with Josey and Josh both up there. And I think the common denominator, they're both different stories, but they seized opportunity to have good careers here. Josey did at a young age, unheralded coming in here. And last year Josh was a one-game starter. Both guys go on to be consensus All-Americans. Two very different paths, but both ended up having really successful careers here.

Hopefully that will be something we'll see more of in the future with guys in this class. We're anxious to see how that goes.

So, before I open it up for questions. Couple things medically. We've got several guys that aren't participating, guys that have had surgeries. Brandon Snyder, I think you know about that, Romeo McKnight, Austin Kelly, Kyle Taylor, Matt Nelson, and Toks are all going to be held out during the course of spring due to medical conditions.

Then the other two announcements, Daviyon Nixon, who joined the program here in January, he'll be an academic red-shirt next year. So he will not be able to play on the field next fall, but has already done a good job jumping in here and transitioning.

We're really pleased he's with us, and he's going to be a really good football player for us. We're very confident of that. We have three guys right now that have moved from defense over to the offensive side. Levi Duwa, I think you may be aware of that one. We did that in December. Then Jake Newborg jumped back over. He's playing offensive guard. Then Cam Harrell is the last one that's going to lineup at running back during the spring. We'll take a look at him and see what he looks like back there.

Those are the announcements I have to make, and we'll get started here tomorrow morning. We're anxious to get going. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. What do you do to speed up the learning curve for your back-up quarterbacks that are both super young?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there is nothing we do to speed them up. It's kind of interesting, the whole quarterback tier right now. The common denominator between Peyton and Spencer is neither of them played, basically, but there still is a world of difference. Spencer just getting here a couple months ago.

But they both have really good attitudes. They're willing and very sharp guys, they're football guys. So when Nate's out there practicing, it's going to look a lot different than the other two guys. This is the best way for them to learn. They're going to be thrown into the water and they're going to learn how to swim quickly.

We saw Peyton make a ton of progress during the fall last year. Basic things like taking a snap under center, something he'd never done before. He struggled pretty significantly. When you talk to him, you'll get a chance to ask him about that, file that away. But even something as simple as that was really tough for him back in August, and frustrating, I'll add that word in there.

But he really progressed. He's got a lot of good attributes. He's a good leader. Guys really respond to him and we've seen him grow. So this is going to be an important period for him to keep pushing forward the next 15 days.

Spencer's just starting from scratch, but, again, a good football mentality. Very serious, hard-working guy. So it's going to be good to see where they're at here in the next five weeks.

Q. How did Daviyon take the news of the academic?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's something we've been aware of all the way through the process. So it's not really a huge surprise to anybody. His attitude, you know, the big thing about recruiting for everybody, not just Daviyon, you project guys, you look at them on film. It all starts there. Then you try to learn as much as you can about a young man.

But until they really get to your place and start working and going to school and doing all the things they have to do as college football players, it's a projection. The good news is he's been on campus a couple months now. We know a lot more about him now than we did back in December. He's been great. He just has a great attitude. He works hard, and he's got a positive attitude. He's significantly talented on top of that. So it's going to be good for him.

It's just something we knew was a possibility. It's really not a big deal. It just means he's not going to be able to play on the game field. But he'll practice and work for it as a football player. When we get him out there, he'll be a good player for us.

Q. Is Alaric Jackson clear?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's good. He's doing good. Had a really good off-season.

Q. How important is it to start to get linebackers lined up?

KIRK FERENTZ: We've actually been working on that for months. The biggest thing coming out of December was clearly cloudy still. I say it to our players every year, the depth chart right now is pretty meaningless. We have guys that are experienced that probably shouldn't be beat out, but they still have to go and do it on the field. That's their job. Their job is not only to practice, but practice well and improve. Because if they're not improving, we're going to have a problem.

So that's first things first. But the linebackers right now, we really don't have a guy with significant game experience at the linebacker position. So it's anybody's ballgame right now. Some guys have a lot of position

flexibility, the other guys maybe not as much. The key thing for us right now is to figure out who the best three are and then where can we put them most effectively. Then if we can find a fourth guy, fifth guy, sixth guy, just kind of take it as that.

Q. When you look at the four interior guys especially that played a little bit at times. They've been mentioned, they've competed. But now, how do you go about trying to decide who is better? Is this a competition you think can last through September or throughout September?

KIRK FERENTZ: Linebackers or defensive tackles? Yeah, we'll see what the 15 days bring. We're not going to make any rash decisions right off the bat. But at the same time we have to start putting guys in the proper spot. So that really is up to them right now, the players.

Like every position, basically players determine what the depth chart's going to be. And I think the biggest thing we have to do as coaches is make sure we don't put them in a position where it's not realistic for them to have success. That's part of our job to figure out what position can we line a guy up to have the most opportunity for success. Then they've got to take it from there.

So what we see in practice, how guys come on, everybody's got an equal opportunity right now to earn playing time. I'm anxious to see how it goes. You know, two, three years ago I guess at this time, Cole Fisher was a guy that we weren't counting on, and ended up playing really well as a fifth-year senior. So you have those kinds of examples.

But, for all I know, it might be one of the first year guys that surfaces. You never can tell, we'll just see how it goes.

Q. The depth chart does tell us we don't see a lot of seniors on there. Have you had a year like that before? Have you noticed how you've got to develop some leaders?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we've had some years where the numbers are down a little bit. Certainly if you lose two guys to the draft, that's really uncommon for us. We've had years where one guy has left, where guys have considered it, to have two guys leave. It's a significant blow to your numbers that way, and then injuries can factor into it too, medical redshirts, things like that.

But the good news is you have guys like Stanley who played pretty well last year and we think has a chance to become a really good player. He's only a junior, but he's voted captain. So you figure on that leadership

base there. That's going to be the key. We have plenty of guys underneath that senior class that are capable of not only playing good football but also having a leadership role for us. It's going to be imperative if we're going to have a good football team.

Q. You're coming off two wins for the first time since 2011. How big is that during the spring?

KIRK FERENTZ: That is a depressing fact, but it is a fact. I'm not doubting you.

Yeah, well, it's good. Winning bowl games makes a big difference, certainly. It always has, always will. I think I'm right back to like '84 where the season was this and that, and we had a pretty good win in the bowl game, came back, and had a good football team. '82 same thing, beat Tennessee, and '83 we had a pretty good ballclub. So it does help.

But it's still history. The big thing right now is it's a whole new landscape, whole new team, and whole new set of challenges. So we've just got to focus on that right now.

Q. Flipping Wirfs and Jackson, was that just checking it out?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they'll both practice both ways. I don't even know how we have them listed right now. It seems like the depth chart doesn't change daily, but maybe weekly. One thing for sure, those guys will practice both sides, I think, until we make a determination. But they both have had good out-of-seasons.

One encouraging thing to the point, we lose some seniors, or don't have a senior class, but we've got two guys there going through the cut ups and going back through our season. I think I told you about the day I walked out to the field behind Boone and Ike, it was kind of depressing, but it was a reality.

You watch these guys on film, and there were a lot of things they did pretty well last year, but a lot of things they're going to do better in the future just because they've got good attitudes. They've got ample experience now. So hope to see really good growth out of both of those players.

Q. Who are some of the guys you want to look at in the return game this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, probably the one guy I would throw out that maybe you're not familiar with is Groeneweg who was red-shirted last year. He's pretty nifty fielding balls and doing some things with the ball. So he's one guy that will be in the mix with the other guys we've had. So that's probably the new one. Then we have some freshmen that might be interesting when

they get here.

Q. What can you tell us about Kyle, a guy that we didn't know much about?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, up until last August, I didn't know much about him either. Levar knew a little about him from being in that part of the state. He showed up. He's kind of a quiet. He kind of blended in out there until we started playing. Then he did some really good things, and he had a really good month of December.

We're anxious to see what he can do this spring. But he's a guy, I think, that we'll add to that senior class. That's kind of a pleasant surprise, maybe it helps rub out the loss that we had.

Q. Is the decision for center going forward, is the decision made?

KIRK FERENTZ: Last year he jumped in when James couldn't go, and he was our number two guy. So we'll start out with him there. We'll see how Cole comes along, Banwart. He was doing some good things last fall and couldn't practice in December because he had a little bit of a surgery issue. So he missed a month there. But he's done some good things too.

So now we've got Levi behind those guys, so we're just trying to build some depth and see where that all goes.

Q. The tight ends you've probably got four tight ends that anybody you wanted. Is running back --

KIRK FERENTZ: We like our running backs, there just aren't many of them. So there's a lot to like, but not a lot of guys to like, if that make sense. We're definitely thin there. We'll have to be careful about how we practice. That's a discussion we've had.

The second part of that is we'll have to count on newcomers to come in and help us out. At least it's realistic at that position. We think it is.

Q. Was Kyshaun Bryan dinged up in the season?

KIRK FERENTZ: He was hurt a lot in the fall. Right now he's healthy and ready to go. So hopefully we'll learn more about him this spring.

Q. With the medical condition with Toks, is he capable of playing football again here at Iowa?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't answer that right now. We're working back through it. He's doing really well first of all. The first semester, everything's good academically. He's back here working, going to school, and everything's going really well. He's just not quite there right now. So there are a couple hurdles he has to get over.

As you might well imagine, if there are any question

marks at all, we're going to air on the side of being smart. So we're just going to let the medical people handle it here.

Q. How does your tone change with a guy like Levi, I know you've had a lot of fun with him, but you've talked a million times about how he's close to being what you guys want him to be. Does your tone change now that he's a starter?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, he's a starter because other guys graduated. But to that point, he's been there every step of the way, and Landan the same way, they're not the same player, but, hey, they both have great attitudes. They come out and work hard every day. There are some similarities and then there are a couple differences in there too.

But they both have really good attitudes, and they're hard-working guys. Landan very subtly improved during the course of last fall. So I think he's starting to ascend a little bit. Levi, when he had to play two years ago over at Illinois, he did a really nice job and jumped in again last year at the end there. He's the kind of guy you wouldn't bet against. He's got the right attributes, and he's a very strong-willed guy.

He's not there yet. He's not at the level he wants to be at and we want him to be at. But I think he has a chance to shape into a really good player. A lot of it is just attitude driven. He's a big guy, but he's got a big attitude also.

Q. For the first time it feels like it took forever, you have health and experience back at wide receiver with Easley, I think, 51 catches, Brandon Smith seemed to gain a lot of weight. He's your starting X right now. Do you think he's got the potential and chance to take steps and you see that happening?

KIRK FERENTZ: He does have the potential. Now we're just hoping to see the growth. I think we saw growth during the course of the fall. I would not describe him as a confident player. That's not unusual for guys that are first-year players. But he's done a lot of good things. He's continued to improve based on what we're seeing in the winter program.

He's one of the guys that we're really curious to see. You've got a couple different tiers on every roster this time of year. And he's a guy that's been running in the offense, but really hasn't played very much. So you hope that he takes that next step and really can ascend.

You talk about Levi, Levi hasn't played all that much, but hopefully he's ready to play with more confidence now and be able to help us play effectively during

game time competition. I think Brandon's in that same category.

Q. What goes into deciding who is Mike and who is Will?

KIRK FERENTZ: Mike position is a communicator position, so he's got a lot on his shoulders, lot of things to process and think about. That's part of the equation, for sure. To me he's got to give you a spark in his own way. Personalities can be different, certainly, but he's got to be the guy that gives you a little spark in there.

But, again, we've got several guys, I think, that are capable. We've just got to figure out who the best one is.

Q. You lose some really awesome players to the NFL here. How do you develop stars and find some stars this spring?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. I think we've got some guys that are ascending that are capable of giving us some big plays. I mentioned Nate, hopefully he'll be sharper this year. He should be. He's a year older and seen a lot of things now in 13 games. So you count on him making that next step. Just basically all of our guys.

We think both our running backs have a chance in their own way to be pretty impactful, but they've still got to take that step. I think the tight end group has big-play capability. I think they've shown that, so we've got to lean that way a little bit.

Nick, I'll go back to the first game. Nick was a guy that was okay in the spring. He was solid in camp, and then really the best football he played up until that day was in that game. He made a really beautiful catch, reaching back for one, and then finishing the one for a touchdown. So those are the kind of things you hope are going to develop and materialize. One prediction I'll make, what we see here in April, when you get to see the team in April, hopefully it's going to look a lot better in September. Because we will not look like world beaters in April. I will make that prediction. I think we're 19 for 19 on that one.

But that's all part of the process. Guys got to keep working, keep ascending, and what really counts is what they do in September. But that's the race we're running right now is trying to get them to do that.

Q. In your mind, what's that next step look like for Nick?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably being a little more decisive, a little quicker in everything he does. He grew tremendously in all areas, but one area I'll point out is leadership. I don't know how many votes for captain he

would have gotten, and same with Josh, I don't know how many votes they would have gotten for captain in August.

Nate was just trying to figure out what the snap count is and all those things when you've never played. So you think the of the moments he's had, ball security and all that, early in the season to where he got. There is nothing magical about any position, but the quarterbacks are such a visible spot. Plus they have a lot to process.

There is no way you can handle that experience, and that's a good thing. Plus he's got a great attitude and he's really improvement driven. So those two things are a good combination.

Q. He had great stats last year, 26-6. Could he be better this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: It was quietly. Nobody really talked about it.

Q. Could he be better this year with not the same stats?

KIRK FERENTZ: I hope not. I hope both of them improve. He did a pretty good job with ball security, but it could have been better. More so in the pocket, just awareness in the pocket. But hopefully the touchdown number goes up. I hope. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

Q. Does he have to run more? Does he have to be more mobile?

KIRK FERENTZ: Maybe at times. To get the first down. I don't think he's going to break unless they're just in man coverage and never look back. But probably 3rd and 5, just pull it down and get the first down. Keep the chains moving. That's not a bad thing.

Q. Ihmir Smith-Marsette, what have the conversations been like with him, because he had some big blow-ups that were pretty noticeable?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's typical of younger players most definitely. You've got to love his attitude. He's fearless out there and he's going to go for it. He's that type of player, and that's good. He's got a good energy to him. I think the challenge for him right now, which is true for most guys, is better focus. Whether it's when he's in the player lounge, maybe getting off the phone a little bit more and, you know, maybe walk across the hall and watch film, those types of things.

That's just part of maturity, learning to budget your time, having a plan. I'm all for recreation and all that stuff, that's good. But just learning how to really be a better player, more mature player, those types of

things.

And the physical development, too. He's not the biggest guy in the world. So if he works hard in the weight room, all those types of things, that will make him a better player. Just being a little more detailed, a little more disciplined. But I could probably say that about every first year player we've had out there playing last year.

Q. Does it surprise you what he was able to bring as far as explosive plays?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not really. It's kind of like (Akrum), not that they're the same players but from the same school. Both those guys on film showed that they're pretty dynamic as players. Ihmir is a real football junkie. He's a football guy. He likes football. That's a good thing. Maybe it will suck him in the way we want.

Q. Have you been able to look at Gervase or Hooker at the linebacker position?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't know how much we do it this spring quite frankly. Just because Brandon's not going to be out there. The guys that make the most sense are probably he and Jake. 50% of that pool is already off the field, so I don't know how much -- plus we're also trying to identify what our linebackers can do.

So I don't know how much we'll toy around with that this time of year, but maybe in August it will be a possibility. The thinking there is we played so many teams that don't play with fullbacks or tight ends, that it's kind of the world that college football has become. So there might be that flexibility of integrating that package a little bit.

Not totally unlike what we did with Kevin Ward, and Kevin full-time converted there a little bit. To think that we'd line him up against Wisconsin 50 snaps probably wouldn't happen. But, again, against some of the other teams we've played, it was realistic and he did a nice job with that. So I think that's something we can toy with.

The other part I would add, both those guys are pretty veteran, smart, savvy guys that are both fifth-year guys that know what's going on. So I think they could do that without crossing their wires back in the back end.

Q. Noah Fant last year. What does he need to show you this spring to show you that he's pushing forward?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, it's not the same as Brandon Smith, but it's a little bit like that if you look at his freshman year. He really didn't play all that much, and had a huge fourth-down conversion out here in our

last ballgame two years ago.

Didn't play all that much, but we were trying to move him along and get his feet wet, and get him learning and get him some game experience. Then this year I thought he did a lot of really good things. There are still a lot of things he can improve on, and a lot of things in his game he can get better at.

It's kind of like a discussion with the quarterback, just more maturity, little bit more awareness, those types of things, quicker decisions. But he's a really talented guy. He's got a good attitude. He likes being out there. He was a quote/unquote young player two years ago, really young. It was all big to him, but that's pretty common. I think he took a big step last year.

He seems to be really confident right now. I think you can just see players with experience, they're a little bit more confident.

Q. Did you come to any conclusions about how you're going to approach recruiting with the new rules this spring? I know you were going to talk about it. Any early visits or anything like that?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll probably start talking more in earnest the next five weeks. We've been looking more at what we've been doing and all that. But we'll do some program stuff here in the next couple weeks. The last time we talked about it which was probably two weeks ago before break, and we are watching. I think everybody's watching. When we're talking to other people, what are you guys doing? Like liars poker, you never know what's going on.

But I think we're still thinking pretty much the same way. We'd rather save that visit for the winter time, if possible. But we may make an exception if somebody can't drive here. I think that's where the real value is. But I'd rather have guys drive here unofficially -- that kind of gives us a little better gauge too how interested they really are. How true their interest is.

Q. Your offense, is it something that's hard to plan to take a big jump in terms of familiarity, everything?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think hopefully -- just like the last however many weeks it's been. Eight weeks minus three, I think, two or three, we were recruiting. Stay five weeks in the office and I think the meetings were a lot more efficient. We were spending a lot more time looking at last year's tape, first of all, because it was the offense that we are going to run. Then, secondly, we had time to do that as opposed to what are we going to call this? How are we going to do that?

Because when you're putting the playbook together,

not that it was a wholesale new playbook, but you want to give everybody a chance to have a voice. That's just a good way to do it. So I think we're probably way ahead that way. Plus after you do something for a year, you can go back and say what can we cut out? How can we streamline this? How can we emphasize that more? We know our players and all of those things combined.

So I think it's a better operation. But hopefully it will translate to production on the field.

Q. Last year you guys were much more diverse on third down than you were the previous year, meaning groupings, plays within the groupings. Really, throughout, but especially on third down. Is that something you targeted last year? And now you have a chance to kind of evaluate it, what did you see on that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think you just kind of take every situation as it is. Every game's a little bit different how they play you. So what do they present on third down? What is the best way to attack it? I think it's probably fair to say Greg and Brian have some different thoughts. To me that's the prerogative of whoever's going to be the play caller. They can steer the thing a little different.

We're probably a different team than a year ago too. So it made more sense to do some two tight end stuff last year on third down as opposed to two years ago. That probably wouldn't have been as smart a deal.

So you lean towards what your players can do, and how the system evolves. But a lot of it is what the opponents present week by week.

Q. Derrick Foster's done a lot of recruiting in the south. Is that kind of where you feel he's comfortable? Is that maybe gaining some traction there?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's where he's from. He grew up there and coached in that region, so he's got a little bit more ties down there, so that makes sense. So that's a benefit. How much we'll do there, it's probably like everything, we'll just keep cherry picking. In Florida we were able to get a good player, we think, out of Georgia this year, which is good.

But I kind of see it's really that way anytime we leave that seven-, eight-hour radius. We don't recruit the whole state of New Jersey, but we get guys from New Jersey. I think that's probably becoming the way of the world with everybody nowadays. I think with social media and the way recruiting is involved, people are branching out a little bit more. But I still see the core of our team still coming from the midwest, Big Ten areas.

Q. You got some new helmets. New equipment, new ideas, how does that work?

KIRK FERENTZ: That really is -- I hate to say legend is overused, the word relationship too, gosh, if I hear that -- but anyway, I mean, it's a good word, but it gets overused too. But I think in this case it's appropriate. Greg and the Rydell folks have a good relationship through the years. That's something they've been talking about.

As you know, this is a real focal topic right now. So I think all the people, everybody involved in the safety of players right now is looking what can we do better. So this is something that's been brewing a little bit, and we feel really fortunate. I know our players are excited about it.

To me, it's the difference between like my -- if I buy an L, it might work, it might not work. We get our stuff every fall. One year it's double X, and the next year an L works. But these are custom made. So I think anytime you have something that's custom made, that's pretty nice. That is kind of the feedback we're getting from our players.

The guys that wore them last year were enthusiastic about it. That was our plan to see what their reaction was before we jumped in the water all the way.

Q. I can't imagine these decisions are made lightly at all. How much thought goes into something like changing the players helmets?

KIRK FERENTZ: The big thing you want, you don't want to do something that's not going to be safe, that's first and foremost. So those assurances. But it's a little bit like knee braces. Knee braces are really expensive, but knee surgeries are expensive too. Beyond that, anytime you can avoid an issue health-wise with a player, that's our obligation to them.

So we've always been kind of committed that way, whether it's the equipment or medical care, we try to make sure our players get the best of everything that way. We're convinced right now that this is the right thing to do, and it can be better for everybody's health and well-being. So that part of the discussion everybody felt like this is the right thing to do.