

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: I just reached in my pocket and got a business card from Stu Schweigert, who was at the Big Ten media days. The one that got away, unfortunately. But anyway, so first of all, just good to be with you. Welcome and appreciate everybody coming here covering the Media Day today.

Certainly an exciting time for I think all of us, and unlike Chicago, we're actually within striking distance of the season and practice, and so it feels like we are back into a football mode. It doesn't matter what year it is, you always have that excitement as a season approaches and comes.

It's great to be back and in camp with everybody. Certainly every year and every season is a new one, and that really started back in January when we lost a really good group of seniors and also a group of underclassmen that went to the NFL. So you start over from scratch in January. That's never going to change.

Certainly in college football, high school football you're going to have change-over in your roster. The NFL has kind of grown the same way. Really what it's all about is the challenge of filling some voids of really good players, good leaders, and then it creates opportunities for players, good chance for anybody to step up and show that they're worthy of helping the football team be successful, and I think each and every year that's probably the fun of it, especially this time of year, is having a chance to watch the team practice and seeing who's going to grow, who are the good stories, seeing who's going to take that leap and really help the team in some way, some fashion.

As I alluded to, we started back in January, and that's really where success starts. I think this team has done a really nice job of handling every phase of the program so far, whether it was winter conditioning, spring football, then obviously summer program, right on through.

Every one of those phases is important, but really the most important part about a football team being together and improving and growing is on the football field, and if you look at it from that perspective, we've only had 22 opportunities. We had 15 back in the spring, and now seven.

We're right in the middle of things right now, and what this is all about is really our team learning how to play. That's every player on our roster learning how to play better and seeing what they can do that way, trying to improve and move forward.

And then camp, camp is very unique. It's a very special time in my mind. It's always been, I think, the most enjoyable time. Most coaches really enjoy this period because it's really the one time during the calendar year where the team has an opportunity to be together pretty much 24 hours a day to be totally focused on what it is they're doing, whether it's meetings, training or actually going out and practicing. So they're learning football, they're learning it very intensively, but also we continue to learn more about each other. It gives us a chance to evaluate as coaches and gives everybody a chance to know each other a little bit better, and the chemistry of a team continues to be developed and built.

You know, it's always been a great time of year, and we're just getting started again from that perspective being a week into it.

Things haven't changed at all. Our focus, our goals are to become a championship-level football team. You look at the polls, we've been picked anywhere from sixth to I guess near the top in our conference, and I think it's just a reflection of -- of our division, I should say, of the competition. It's going to be a strong division, there's no question about that. Competition is going to be strong week in and week out, and really what it gets down to, there are 12 games that are scheduled right now. There's really not much we can do other than try to have a great camp, try to win our first game, and the best way to do that is to just make sure we're taking care of today, whatever the task may be. That's kind of where that's at.

And then the last thing is I just want to thank our fans again. I'm not right on top of ticket sales but I'm confident we'll have good crowds in Kinnick again, no exception there.

It's been great to see the new north end zone, see that completed, and all of us are very appreciative of the individuals that have helped make that a reality. It was great last year, really enhanced the stadium, the

environment, which was already good. It's made it that much better, and we're really excited to see the finished product -- I've seen it from my office window actually, but the media board, the scoreboard up there and it looks fantastic. We're excited about that.

Tomorrow we'll host kids' day. Especially missing an opportunity to be in the public last spring, that makes this even that much better. Three weeks from now we'll actually be playing a football game.

It's all coming fast, but so far so good, and I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. In what way can A.J. Epenesa take his game to another level?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's like everybody on the team. Just basically learning how to play every down a little bit better, a little more proficiently. He has not started a game, and that's only a byproduct of us having some really good players in front of him, but he's a tremendous talent. He's done a lot of good things already, but now the challenge is to play 60, 70 snaps in a ballgame and play them all as well as he possibly can. So it's another step for him.

He works hard. He's got a great attitude. There's no reason to think he won't be a better player this year. We're certainly counting on that, and based on what we've seen so far, I think it's fair to expect that.

Q. I think you have a new field goal kicker coming in. How is the competition going for your No. 1 field goal kicker?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the field goal kicker situation, Miguel graduated, Recinos did a great job, so we've got two guys with Caleb (Shudak) and Dunc (Keith Duncan) both competing right now. They're both doing a good job, and then with the punting game we've got Colten (Rastetter) back, we've got Michael Sleep-Dalton who has transferred in from Arizona State and he's done a nice job thus far. Anxious to see them both in Kinnick tomorrow.

And unfortunately we've had one injury in camp. Ryan Gersonde will be out for the year. He's got a knee injury that required surgery, so unfortunately he's going to be taken out of that competition.

Q. Offensively are they ready to step up, Landan and Levi?

KIRK FERENTZ: We hope so. They've worked hard since they've been here. They've got great personalities. They've really grown. So yeah, I think they both are playing their best football right now and having a good preseason and really in the offensive line it's interesting, we've got a lot of wide-open

competition, so we'll see how it all goes. Really these next two weeks are going to be really interesting just to see how things materialize.

Q. They look good with their hair cut, a little quicker.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, absolutely, a little more aerodynamic. It's a swimmer's trick, right, but they're looking good.

Q. What can you tell us about the case you've made for Oliver Martin's waiver and what you've heard about what his chances are?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I really haven't had much involvement in it. That's handled by the compliance folks. So they're the ones that are on the ground floor there. As I understand it, it's been forwarded to the NCAA, and what happens thereafter, probably no way to predict, like most things that go that direction. We'll just kind of wait patiently and see where it goes. But Oliver doesn't have any information, I have no information, so right now we'll just kind of wait and see how it all goes.

Q. When did you guys submit the forms?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't tell you exactly. I think it's been within the last two weeks, and I have no idea if there's an average turnaround. There's not much we can do, so we'll just remain neutral, I guess. I'd like to be optimistic but I don't have any grounds for that, nor do I have grounds for pessimistic, so we'll just kind of wait and see what happens.

Q. How does he look?

KIRK FERENTZ: He looks good. It's great to have him on the field. We've known about Oliver for quite some time. He's a tremendous young person, and has been really I think warmly received by his teammates. He's earned their respect, he's doing a good job, and if he can get eligibility, I certainly think he'll help our football team this year. If he doesn't, then we'll bank this year, use it as a learning year and look forward to having him be with us next season.

Q. Last year you switched to a 4-2-5 halfway through the season. Has there been a steeper learning curve with that, or has the process been pretty smooth?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think it's been smooth. It just gets down to a couple things. The personnel of the teams that we play and face, and the world keeps going in the direction of three, four receivers on the field at one time. I think that makes it more of a viable possibility, and then the other factor is how we do. We graduated Amani Hooker, who did a really nice job in that position. You graduate him, who's going to take his spot, and then by doing that, is that going to leave

us a little thinner at some other spots. So there's a lot of variables that go into it, but yeah, it's certainly going to be part of who we are moving forward, and I can't give you the percentages. We'll probably know more of that as we go along.

Q. What excites you about (Nico) Ragaini and Tyrone Tracy, two guys that obviously got a taste last year because of the redshirt rules but haven't played a game other than that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think having the year, they really put it to good use, and they're both playing extremely -- at a lot faster pace right now than they were a year ago, and that's common for both players, especially guys that are first-year guys on campus, even if they may have been there the spring before. Things are moving fast for a lot of guys.

They're both I think doing a really nice job, and between those two, Brandon (Smith) and Ihmir (Smith-Marsette), those are certainly our top four guys right now, and seeing a lot of good things even going back to the spring that are encouraging. I think that position certainly has a chance to be a little bit more potent than a year ago.

Q. Your defensive tackles, obviously it's an important decision, it's not a statistical position necessarily. What have you seen from not only Brady (Reiff) and from Cedrick (Lattimore) but also Daviyon (Nixon) and some of the other guys that are fighting for snaps?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, and you're kind of alluding to it, that was a real area of interest going into spring practice I thought because of the guys we graduated and the number of guys we graduated up front.

You know, Cedrick has played, Brady has played, but they both had their best springs by far. They were a lot more consistent with what they were doing. It was the best they've looked, and we've only had seven practices so far, but I think they're both -- they look like seniors are supposed to look, and that's reassuring. You hope that's going to happen. There's no guarantees, but we've witnessed that with both those guys. And then the other thing, the guys behind them, Noah Shannon I thought really did a good job in the spring. Daviyon looks good, he's in good shape right now, probably the best shape he's been in his life. He's done a nice job, and then Austin Schulte was a guy who really emerged I thought during practice, who quite frankly two years ago I was worried about him getting injured out there just because of the rehabs that he had gone through, and he was -- it was hard for him. But boy, I'll tell you, he's really just stayed with it. He's just kept working very quietly. I thought he did some really good things in the spring, and there's no

question he'll be a guy that'll have a role this year for us.

It looks like we'll be able to rotate guys, which is encouraging.

Q. Last season you had a thing with the cut blocks in the middle of the field and you had the thing with guys blocking 19 yards downfield against your defense. Did you have a say in any of those types of rules issues in the off-season? Did you build a case and did you have a say?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I've had some discussions, and I'll never surrender, but I've lost interest, I guess, in terms of pursuing it. Was it Don Quixote who kept running into the windows, right? I don't want to be accused of being that guy, and I'm Hungarian, and I think he was from Spain.

So anyway, yeah, I think we're just going to be very careful about our cut blocking from how we teach it. I think the rule is really ambiguous right now. I think it's almost impossible for the officials to officiate correctly, so why -- because you know when we get one, it's going to be in a big game, and I know you guys love to track those explosives. We had a couple of them pulled off the table. I think we're fighting a fight that's probably not worth fighting at this current moment.

Personal commentary, I don't think it's of real interest to people nationally because it's not a big part of what people do, so it's not tempo offense, all that stuff.

Q. But you did actually move forward with that you like the rule part?

KIRK FERENTZ: No. Actually no. Well, yeah, the win was reviewing onside kicks because we've had a couple of those historically go against us that were illegal plays, and that doesn't do us any good now, but it probably cost us two games in my career.

So at least, yeah, we won one, and that was 100 years ago.

The other one I'm confused with now is the double-team wedge on kickoffs. I'm not sure why it's a rule, and I don't know why double teams aren't allowed. Now we've got to be careful. It's just another semantic discussion, and it's going to be interesting to see how it gets officiated this fall. Probably like most new interpretations, it might get -- have some interesting outcomes early in the season, so we've got to be really careful.

Q. You have some big shoes to fill at tight end with the departures of Noah Fant, T.J. Hockenson - guys like Shaun Beyer, Nate Wieting, they've learned

from them, especially with Beyer coming off of the injury. How have they responded in the off-season and in fall camp?

KIRK FERENTZ: First is Nate. Nate is doing a really nice job, and again, we've only practiced seven times right now, but he's really done a good job, not only playing but he's leading. He's fully into it. Not that he wasn't a year ago, but he got overshadowed for obvious reasons. And then Shaun Beyer is fully healthy now, so I think he's off to a good start, and good to have Drew Cook back, too, who was out basically all of spring. Those three guys are kind of the basis of that position right now, and then we'll see what materializes.

Q. Running backs, is it the veteran guys and the new guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, pretty much, yeah, and we got a good look at Shadrick (Byrd) last spring, so it's good to see (Tyler) Goodson out there now and get him running around a little bit, and it'll be fun to watch him tomorrow. We'll do some live work, so we'll see what he looks like. But all five of those guys are doing well and they're all, I think, practicing well.

Q. Free safety in the past has kind of been your position, whether it be the calls, the signals and had some petty guys as well as good athletes there. You lost Jake Gervase and inserted Kaevon (Merriweather). What does he bring to that position, and why not Geno Stone in that position?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think we have position flexibility, first of all, and it's good for both of them to work there and be involved in that. But those two guys clearly have risen at this point to be the top two guys, with Geno obviously being ahead, more experienced. The more work Kaevon can get back there doing that, that's going to be beneficial for him.

And just like we talked about a minute ago, the defensive tackle position being a real area of interest in the spring, I'd kind of say our safety position is the same way at this given point. I think it's real unclear right now where we're at behind at that position.

And it's not a bad situation, it's just who's going to do what. And again, I think when you look at this whole thing right now, probably like a week from Wednesday we'll have a lot better idea of where we're at personnel-wise. Right now there's a lot of positions being contended for, and that could go on into October, too.

But I think the picture will be a little bit more clear after another, whatever that is, 10, 12 days here.

Q. With all the experience I guess you have at corner, do you anticipate some slide-over in case

somebody may be --

KIRK FERENTZ: Not necessarily anticipate it, but we've discussed it, and it's a possibility. But it's not -- right now we're not really working in that light. We want to see what the other guys, how they do back there.

Q. Is that more or less the same for the offensive line, too?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it is. I think I'll go on record saying the tackles will probably be tough to beat out, and (Tyler) Linderbaum has done a good job at center and seems to be taking to that pretty well. Then who's the two and three center, that type of thing, we've got to get that straightened out. But I think we've got a start on that.

But yeah, I think anybody right now is in contention for the other jobs, and somebody has got to be ready to play tackle, too. Yeah, it's wide open in my mind right now.

Q. Your program has a track record of performing well under the radar, yet you come into the preseason coaches' poll ranked No. 19. How are your players handling going from being the hunters to being the hunted?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know how many of our players are aware of that, and I'm not sure how aware I am. I'm pretty aware that coaches have a really bad record in predicting stuff; is that fair? I think they do worse than the media. I used to think it was the other way around, but what do we know? None of us know anything. Well, maybe some guys do. But most of us kind of live in a closed environment. You know, I really don't know that much about our conference quite frankly at this point. I don't know how anybody does.

And when it gets to polls, there's usually five to eight teams you can pretty much say, yeah, these guys will probably be in the top 20. After that it's a jump ball. And I think if you go back and track it, that's probably how it works out.

I hope nobody is wasting too much time on it from our camp, and really what's important right now is us working towards being a good football team, and I think that's where our players -- at least in the time I've been around them, that's what they're doing. They're working towards that.

Q. How has D.J. Johnson's launch been at his position?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's doing okay out there. Winning a few and losing a few, but he's doing okay so far.

Q. How have your expectations changed with a

veteran quarterback?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, it's like any position, you just hope every year that player plays a little bit more proficiently and better. I think at the quarterback position, it's even more emphasized or intensified because that's a position that requires so much decision making and poise and things that are really hard to get done in practice sometimes. The game experience can be really valuable.

If you've got a guy who has game experience and then you factor in the fact that, at least with Nate, he's not only a guy that's got game experience, but he's a guy that's really -- probably too serious about critiquing his performance and all those kind of things. I think that's a good combination.

At the end of the day, you just hope those players are playing, processing things quicker making decisions faster, giving themselves more of a chance to be successful, and I think that certainly we're counting on that from Nate, and based on what we've seen thus far, I think he just keeps pushing it forward.

Q. Has there been any movement behind Nate besides (Spencer) Petras?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I'd categorize that same as I talked about whatever it is a week from Wednesday, we really are kind of in camp mode through -- not this coming Wednesday but a week from Wednesday. So that would be like 12 days. We're just going to let all these things play out a little bit, and if somebody is just doing that, we'll go ahead and move guys around. But we've got a lot of guys competing, and I think right now that are kind of in the same general area and we'll see what surfaces.

Q. What's your expectation for Nate right now?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just play the best he can play, and he doesn't have to be the guy that's going to save our team or be the face of Iowa football. He's just got to play really well at quarterback. Like all of our seniors, but you hope your quarterback is a leader, and he's been that.

I guess my hopes are that we see his best football this year and his best leadership, and that's what we're hoping for from all of our guys. And I guess if there's a cautionary note again, just don't try to do too much, just be the best player you can be. That's all you can do, and by doing that he'll really help our football team.

Q. What's your ideal production level for him?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm really a bad one on that, how many yards he had last year and all that. Interceptions will probably stick with me more because that's one really important job for anybody that touches the football is to treat it with real respect, and the

quarterback touches it every play, so that's where his job description begins.

But yeah, I think the stats all kind of work themselves out. If he just keeps playing better, and I think he will -- and he missed some throws. Every quarterback misses throws. If you can shut that gap down, because you don't get them back, but if you can close the gap on those kinds of things -- and every player has plays they'd love to have back, four or five plays a game, geez, I wish I could have that one over. So the more you can close the gap on those, that is the beauty of experience, that's the beauty of being out there and being in the competition.

I can't guarantee it's going to happen, but I think all of us are confident we'll see him just continue to play better.

Q. You return all three running backs from last season, so obviously another year of off-season is going to help with growth and leadership. What kind of improvements on the field have you seen from the running back group this off-season into camp?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, so Ivory (Kelly-Martin) was a little bit limited last spring. We didn't see an awful lot of him healthy, and that's been the big question mark with him. When he is healthy, he looks really good, but last year there was a lot of times where he just didn't have that ability to make the cut and hit it the way he can. So he is healthy now. That's the good news, and he is looking really good.

But where I'm going with the whole thing, Toren and Mekhi both took big steps in the spring. I thought they just did everything a little bit better. I think that group right now, the group of those three guys that have been on the field, that's a really healthy group of guys. They're good players. They care about each other. They complement each other well, and if we can go into the season with all three of them healthy, it would be our job to figure out how to use them really intelligently.

Q. When you look at the growth of the wide receiver position just from what you had a couple years ago to now, it's pretty striking, but how would you qualify where they are right now in your offense, and do you feel like they can replace some of the production that you lost at tight end?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, if you look at it, the numbers speak for themselves. You have two guys that were fresh out of high school and really didn't know a heck of a lot about what they were doing, but they're fresh out of high school, good effort and good guys and all that, and then you had a guy who was

fresh out of junior college who had a really good career at Western, but he was trying to learn, too. I said after that Wyoming game, that was clearly the best day of football he had had during that calendar year. You know, that was a good time to have it. But we saw him do some things in that game that we hadn't seen in practice.

You just use that as a starting point, now you move forward two years, and both Ihmir and Brandon did some really good things last year. But they're both, I think, miles ahead of where they were two years ago and certainly ahead of last year. We lost Nick, obviously, but we've talked about Nico and Tyrone earlier, two guys that I think are very capable there.

It's a much better group than it was two years ago, and that's saying -- I mean, we had a bad group. Well, not bad but you know what I'm saying. They weren't going to make anybody too nervous. At the way the whole thing plays out is we lost two first-round talents at tight end. I'm not saying we're going to have first-round receivers, but we have guys I think that are capable of playing, and we have good tight ends right now, so hopefully the ball is going to get spread around a little bit more and people are going to have to defend us a little differently than they did last year.

Q. You guys ran kind of a lot of nutty plays last year on special teams. Do you want to do that again?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, if they're there on film and they're there in practice, if they look good, at least you have enough reason and evidence to say this might be worth taking a chance on, then yeah, we'll definitely try to do that. I think LeVar has done a really good job of trying to coax me a little bit and move me forward, and Seth when he was involved in the punting game, that was part of the package when we installed the new package. It had a really interesting fake package that came with it.

You know, if it's one more way to make somebody have a tougher time preparing for us or keeping them on edge, then yeah, we'll definitely try to be smart about that.

Q. How are you with sports betting becoming legal in the state next week? Have you talked with the team about this? Have you warned them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, really my perspective, it may be naïve, but I was telling somebody the other day, I go back, because you get asked that question frequently. I still remember somewhere in the '80s an FBI agent typically would come into camp and speak to the team, and I'll never forget, I can't tell you what the number was but it was a big number, it was the amount of

money that they guesstimated was being done in Iowa City on gambling, sports gambling, and it blew my mind at that point, and that's 25 years ago or 30 years ago, whatever it is.

It's always been an industry. It's always been something we've got to be cognizant of I think and educate our players on. So I really don't think the approach changes. I don't see how it changes at all. Gambling has always been involved, and so there's just lines of demarcation are pretty clear, and any of us involved in sports, to even think about being involved in that is just a bad deal. I don't think it changes our approach at all. We'll continue to educate our players about it. They need to obviously stay away from that in all regards.