

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 3, 2019

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Just start out with a couple comments about Saturday and then we'll look forward to this coming weekend.

Obviously pleased to be 1-0, and right now our big focus is on trying to improve and seeing if we can develop here in week 2, and we're going to need to do that certainly. Miami played a really tough first half, put a lot of pressure on us last Saturday night, and pleased with the way our guys stuck in there and regrouped at halftime and came out and played a much better second half. Looked a little bit more efficient out there.

The other good thing is that we got to play a lot of players, and that was by design, and I think -- one thing about a first game, you learn a little more about yourself, and that's a good thing. Again, saw a lot of positive efforts out there, and then also in any game you get learning opportunities, and hopefully we saw some things on Sunday that we can get better at and try to carry that as we move forward.

All in all, pleased to start out that way, and now we'll move forward.

I forgot to mention captains last week, so I'll try not to do that again, but we have the same four guys; Nate on offense; OJ and Kristian on defense; and then Brady Ross, special teams captain.

Injury-wise last week, we had two guys not dress, two guys on the two-deep, Banwart and Julius Brents were both out. Brents is going to be out for a couple weeks. Cole has got a shot, I think, this week, so we'll just see how this week goes, but he worked today and looked pretty good, so that's good news.

Then had two injuries in the game that both players are going to miss some time. Moss came out with a leg injury, and he's going to be out for a while. Riley is probably going to miss four to six weeks, and then the good news with Alaric is it was a sprain. So the bad news is he's going to miss a couple weeks, but he will not be with us for the next two games, that's for sure, and we'll just assess it as we go along. So that's the status right now.

Moving on to Rutgers. They played a good game the other night, started a little bit slow, but they really got

going and did a really good job. They're a 1-0 football team just like we are.

I think the biggest thing right now, it's the first time we've hosted them, and earliest Big Ten game we've played in the last 20 years, so it's going to be a little bit different, and the biggest thing is they're playing well right now. I think if you look back last year, they really finished strong. They played four of their five opponents at the end of season, all five of the last opponents were really good football teams, and four of those games really they played very well.

They clearly made progress last year. I think that carried over into this season. And now as you look at their football team, they're a little bit different in some regards with the new quarterback that transferred. He played a good game the other night, threw the ball all over the place and threw the ball really well. They've got two skilled running backs that I think are as good as anybody has got in the conference, but those guys are really dangerous players, and they've got good skill guys outside, as well.

They play a 3-4 front, so that's going to be an adjustment for us. We don't see a lot of that, so that's going to be a big thing for us this week. And all of their specialists are back, and they're a good special teams outfit, and they have been for quite some time. We've got our hands full in that regard, as well.

All in all, the biggest thing right now is we've got to move forward. The cliché about week one to week two is only true if you practice well and really do a good job with your preparation. That's something we did well last week. Now the challenge is to try to do that again this week.

We've got a couple practices under our belt, good start so far, but we certainly have a lot of work to do right now before the week is out and before we're ready to play the game on Saturday.

I'll close out by thanking our fans one more time. It was a great crowd in Kinnick. Great to have a sellout in the opener, and night games are always great in there, but the environment was really tremendous. Appreciate the fans adding to the atmosphere, and hopefully we'll have the same thing on Saturday. Certainly a little bit

mode of operation for early morning kickoff, but all regardless, we're anxious to get out there and get playing.

Q. What has Kyler Schott done to kind of slide up the depth chart so quickly?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's practiced and prepared well. He's done it kind of quietly. He did a lot of good things last year, but really has improved physically. He's a little bit more mature now, been around the program a little bit longer, and he's one of those guys that I don't want to call him nondescript, but he's not flashy, but if you watch him closely, he just does a lot of things really well and consistently, and he's certainly done that this August. He really had a good month of practice and was very consistent. He's also a versatile guy that can move around and doesn't seem to affect him at all.

Q. Do you plan to continue to rotate offensive linemen this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we were planning to do that anyway, and then we were forced to do it maybe a little bit more than the plan was calling for with AJ coming out. We're certainly going to be short him. We may get Cole back, maybe not, we can't count on that, but yeah, we'll keep rotating guys around.

The good news is I thought Kyler played well, Ince came in and played well, both the Paulsens played their best football since they've been here. So the trick for us right now is to keep pushing forward and see these guys improve.

Q. Kyler doesn't seem overwhelmed by the moment at all. He seems relaxed. Is that how he plays, too?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of how he's been since he's gotten here. He was on the scout team initially, like most first-year guys and young guys, and he just kind of fits in, gets along well with his teammates, and he works hard. The biggest thing he's given himself, he's worked hard and his body is a little bit more better able to stand up now to competing against good players. He's done that all camp long, so it's great to see.

Q. Was the big thing he was lacking coming out just height? Height was the big thing everyone questioned.

KIRK FERENTZ: We thought he was a good height -- he did a lot of good things in high school, competitor in a couple sports, but I don't know how I'm going to stand here and say any of us saw this coming, but he's just quietly ascended, did a good job in the spring. Lattimore is a tough guy to block, and he probably blocked him as well as anybody we have during the course of camp. I'm not saying he won every battle, but he certainly did a lot of good things. Sometimes you just have to believe what you see, and I think he's a

good example of it.

Q. Was a big part of getting him here Reese Morgan?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, absolutely. Reese kind of has a pulse on things, and I'd ID'd Kyler as one of the guys we should look at.

Q. When you look at walk-ons like Kyler, is the fact that they're a wrestler, does that open your eyes? Does that kind of move them ahead in line a little?

KIRK FERENTZ: It doesn't hurt. We mentioned Reese. I think all of us kind of followed during wrestling and the same thing going to the state track meet or the Drake relays, whatever, just watching guys compete and how they do when they maybe need a big throw or need a big moment, how they react that way. Any kind of success like that always goes on a guy's resume or doesn't.

Q. You commented on Mekhi before, but he seemed more confident in that opening game. What do you notice on him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think that's what we saw during the course of last season. To me -- he looked like he kind of had a different gear was the Penn State game last year. I thought that was the first time where it looked like he was starting to get comfortable, and then he just kept getting better during the rest of that season. And did the same thing in spring, as did Toren, and they carried it right through camp. He's a real confident guy right now, certainly knows a lot more than he did a year ago about what we're doing and what his role is, that type of thing. He's a delightful young guy, humble, hard-working, team-oriented type player.

Q. Have you ever sent an assistant coach to Key West, Florida, to find a player?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, but I'm sure we'd have plenty of volunteers if I asked.

Q. That's a tough place for a kid to be found. You guys found Mekhi finally at --

KIRK FERENTZ: He actually found Western. That's how it all worked. And then Kelvin saw him up in the bowl game a year ago November, December, right there in that Thanksgiving or post-Thanksgiving weekend. KB saw him, really liked him that day and made a note of it and just told me about it, and we ended up having an opening because of a medical situation, so that's how one thing led to another. So just filing away information sometimes is a good thing.

Q. Last season in the season opener Nate seemed to struggle; 11 of 23 a year ago, but this past week he was 21 of 30, 200-something yards, three

touchdowns. What kind of improvement did you see from Stanley from week one a year ago to week one this past week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's probably the same discussion as Mekhi. I think any time a player has an opportunity to go out and play 12, 13 games in a season, hopefully you're learning, not only playing but you're learning, and gaining confidence through that experience. And then the next step is to take that and transition it into improvement, just kind of like I'm hoping our team will do this week. It's kind of the same thing, same process.

Nate works at it so hard, he's extremely conscientious that way, and he's got good mental toughness. He's a good football player. We're hoping to see that. Hopefully this is his most productive and enjoyable season of his career.

Q. You said a few times in off-season that you want to see Nate have more fun and loosen up when he plays. Did you see any progress in that season opener?

KIRK FERENTZ: I hope he was having fun the other night. He was playing pretty good, so that sure helps, and something I'd never know about.

He was out there in total control of the game, I thought. Really did some nice things. Stats could have been even a little bit better, but most of those throws are down the field, we're not just throwing the ball out into swing routes or tunnel screens and things like that. We threw one of those, I guess, but he's throwing the ball down the field and probably could have helped him out a little bit with another catch or two. That might have been a good thing.

Q. It may be kind of strange considering what he did in the spring, but Tristan might have been the unsung hero the other night, flipping from side to side. It's not an easy transition footwork wise, yet it seemed almost seamless. What did you think of his performance?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, knock on wood, he did a good job sliding in and then Levi slid out to the tackle position and didn't seem to be affected, either. That's one benefit of having guys that have played. Both those guys have been in the program and they've played a little bit. But not every player is capable of doing that, too. I'll qualify it by saying that.

But I thought he clearly played his best game since he's been here. It's kind of the same discussion with Nate, Mekhi. You get a guy who's played for a year or two, hopefully they're accelerating their level of play and just looking a little bit more comfortable out there and a little bit more natural in their play. And he

certainly did, he played his best game since he's been here, and that's really encouraging for us.

Q. Rutgers had some skill position guys that showed in the UMass game that can be dangerous. Is that a little concerning for secondary work?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, first of all, the quarterback, that's -- I'll have to go back and look, I think that's the most yardage they've gained over the last two years, last year and this year in one game, but that gives them a new dimension. I'm sure that's why he won the job, with all due respect to everybody else there. And both their backs are just really good players. They're a little bit different, but they're both really good. No. 2 is a really dynamic player, can do a lot of different things, and they use him in a lot of different ways, and then No. 1, he runs hard and runs like he's mad at somebody. He just goes really hard. We're going to have to tackle him. And that's not easy to do. He's a very physical, tough guy.

They've got some good receivers on top of that.

Q. With Alaric and the bye week coming up, are you confident at this point you would get him back for Middle Tennessee?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll just have to see. We'll see. I think it's realistic, but everybody heals differently, and the good news is it doesn't look like we're looking at surgery, so that's a good thing, and just hopefully he goes a little faster than everybody hopes or thinks, that type of thing. But we can't count on him. We'll just see how it goes. But I think it's realistic to think he'll play this year for us.

Q. I know it's a small sample size, but Cody Ince and Justin Britt, looking back at the tape how did you feel those guys did?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that was one of the pleasant things that happened, I think, because you never know. Those guys, it was the first time they've been anywhere playing real football in college, so I thought they both reacted really well, and that's a positive surge for them. They did some good things, and they'll see some things -- even though they didn't play a lot, they'll see some things they can get better at, too. But I thought it was a good start for both of them. And on the sideline, they seemed like they were doing fine. They weren't all just totally star struck.

Q. Britt had surgery, major surgery less than a year ago. What's that say about his focus and just his healing powers and everything?

KIRK FERENTZ: I just kind of made mention that we were looking at the tape from this morning and really he hasn't played football since '17 if you really want to talk about playing serious football. To me it's amazing

that he's -- A, he did as well as he did in camp, and he's doing a good job right now in practice. A couple circuits blown, but that's about what you'd expect for younger guys especially. It all starts to add up a little.

But I mentioned back during the recruiting thing, I sat down with him in December I guess it would have been at his school. He's just a really impressive guy. He impressed us in camp a couple years ago, and the more you learn about him, the more you really like about him. He's a tremendous young guy.

Q. This game in week two, how does that affect the way you guys plan out the eval and kind of the rotation going forward because this is the earliest you've played a conference game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it is different. They're significant. Any time you're in a conference game it's a significant thing. You only get nine of those, you get 12 games total but nine conference games, so that's really important. It's kind of like to me, the month of September especially is just about really focusing on trying to improve and pull things together, tie up the loose ends, those types of things. And I'm sure they're fighting the same battle, though. It's their second game, as well, so it's even footing for both teams. But it's a significant game. Every game is significant, and we're just racing against time. That's really what we're doing. I'm sure they're trying to do the same thing.

Q. Do you like it?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, I'd rather play our non-league games to me personally, but nobody asks for my opinion. I'm not waiting for them, either. That's just the way it is, so we'll play them.

Q. I think it's in two years, so who knows what everybody is doing then, but you're supposed to start the season against Indiana --

KIRK FERENTZ: You guys are way ahead of me on that one. I don't even know who we open with next year, nor do I care at this point.

Q. In terms of hearing next man in, I think Jermelle Lewis 2002 I think I heard about 40 times down stairs today. Is that all conditioning for you? Is that sort of a little bit of psychology?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's just a reality. It's a reality of our sport, at least. First of all, just for full disclosure, pretty sure I stole that from the Broncos. I think that was their deal with their running backs and all that stuff. Everything we do in coaching is stolen, and I'll admit to that.

But it just made sense, and like I said, it did start back in the early days, and it just makes sense. One thing about a season, typically you're going to have guys that

have injury issues and things are going to pull them off the field and somebody has got to be ready, and that's just kind of the way it goes. In our sport we have so many players involved that it's just natural and the nature of the game.

You know, there's two things you can do: You can just wallow and worry about your problems or you can just say, hey, it's an opportunity for somebody to step up and go, and that's what we're counting on. We need that every week.

Q. The consistency with that message, was the conditioning part of that intentional, just having those guys all ready and just thinking that way?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's certainly things that are just fundamental to our game, and that's certainly one of them. I think it's really important that the players understand that things are going to happen. You never know what the adversity is going to be in a season or a week, but typically something happens every week where you have to make an adjustment and try to improvise a little bit so if people aren't conditioned to do that, it could be problematic for sure.

Q. With Kaevon, I think you only had one Cash formation in on defense, and even the second quarter you kind of cut it off after that first drive. Was it just kind of trying to narrow what was going on on the field? Was there a reason you decided to cut it out?

KIRK FERENTZ: Part that and then part is personnel driven, too, how they play us. This week, I don't know. These guys play a lot of personnel groups we're going to have our normal personnel out there too I'd imagine. You try to figure out what's the best way to defend it. Part of that's what they're doing, part of that's where we're at. You always want to get your best guys out there to have a chance to defend what they're doing. But I think you'll probably see them mix it up as we go along.

Q. There were mistakes probably by first-year guys who were out there for the first time. Did you feel like they were -- did they do what they needed to do and now they could correct it, or are there issues that are beyond --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, especially defensively. You know, if you look at their two scoring drives, we gave up a couple big plays, I think three in the two drives. Some of that goes back to communication, just a better understanding of what technique we need to be playing. It's not good that it happened, but if there's a positive, if we'll learn from it, I guess, is the best way to say it. Hopefully we'll do that so we don't get caught in some of the situations that are hard to defend and you end up giving more yardage up than you want to.

Like any team, you want to make your opponent work a little bit if you're playing defense, and we gave up a couple easy plays that aren't going to be good for us if we keep doing that.

Q. Kaevon said today that he was thinking he was going to play basketball in college up until about late December of his senior year when you guys got involved. You guys take a lot of chances like that, but can you think back to his recruiting? Was that Phil Parker who started zeroing in on him? He said his life changed after that.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's Phil's area geographically to recruit, and he does a good job of researching and finding players he thinks would fit with what we do and the way we do things, and then Kaevon came on -- I think when I went out there it was January so I think we had already made the decision that we were full speed ahead on him. You look at his football tape, there wasn't as much evidence maybe as you watch him on the basketball court, on a good team, a really good basketball team. We felt like he was a sharp guy that was a good athlete that showed enough aggression and physicalness on the field, and then just a matter of like are you willing to make that transition and work hard and learn how to play the game.

Q. Could Toren end up being sort of a pseudo-fullback out there?

KIRK FERENTZ: I doubt that. He'd probably go on strike if that happened or threaten to quit, but no, it's just a joke. To play fullback for us, that means like basically you're relinquishing all rights to touch the ball.

So no, he's not making that transition. We have some good prospects coming up. We've really liked Brady Ross at that position and we've got some good young guys coming up, I think three good young guys.

Q. OJ is a kid that had the first interception the other night, first of the season. He's a captain, kind of been in and out of the lineup. How proud are you that he's been able to stick with it and accomplish what he's done?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's all out there for him right now. This is his senior year. You hope guys play their best every year of their career and certainly their senior years. I think I'm probably going to violate the Buckley amendment here, but I've told the pro guys the most impressive thing about his whole career, his dad is an engineer, and he was determined and is determined to be an engineer, graduated as an engineer from Iowa, and he had a rough go initially. I mean, he got beat up pretty good in that classroom. It's tough to do both. It's not for everybody certainly. What he was going through, I wasn't sure he was going to stick with that

quite frankly, but he did. He was determined, and he's going to be just fine.

He will be an engineer graduate, and I think job placement is about 98.9 percent or 99.8 percent, I guess I've got my numbers backwards, so he's going to be gainfully employed when he's done playing football and that's great. But to me I think that probably spoke to what he's all about as much as anything he's done on the football field, but he's done a lot of good things on the football field, too, and it was great to get a turnover the other night and it was great to see him get that pick. That was really good, and even better we converted it into points. That was good football there.

Q. Do you have any freshmen that you've decided are full-season guys yet?

KIRK FERENTZ: I kind of alluded to it last week. Our mindset right now, the offensive guys, they're on the fast track, those four guys. We haven't changed our thoughts on that. And then defensive, we're just kind of doing that right now on defense.

Q. Is Goodson ahead of Martin, Kelly-Martin?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's not ahead of him, but he's in the picture for sure. My guess is we're going to need all four of those guys, and we like all four. And we like Shadrick Byrd, too. He's been a good addition, and there's nothing about him not to like based on what he's done thus far.

Q. LaPorta got in a couple of goal line situations. Is he kind of -- in some ways is that to balance out the classes, you lost two out of your top three?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. And it's probably the same discussion as I just mentioned Saturday. Josiah has really done a good job, too. Who knows, by the end of the year, we'll see -- we're just going to keep watching guys in practice and if they elevate their play, he may be in the Army, too; we'll see what happens. But Sam started out pretty good in camp and has done a nice job, so we'll just keep bringing him along. I think we're going to need at least four if not five, so we'll just play it week by week.

Q. I think Oliver ended up with about 10 snaps. Do you see that going up this week and beyond?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we'll play it week by week. But that whole group right now, it's kind of like, you know, not that we're there, but I think we have a much healthier group than what we've had in the past certainly and more numbers, too. The good news is that'll keep all those guys from getting run ragged and hopefully bring the best out of all of them.

Q. Seemed like your running backs just really ran with a lot more efficiency, their vision kind of

matched their footwork. In what ways do you think they made strides along with what Derrick taught them in the off-season to accelerate some of their

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KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's just what you said. No position is just go out and play. There are things you learn at every position certainly, and Derrick does a great job with those guys. It kind of goes back to the conversation about Stanzi, too. Just playing does a lot of good for you, so you play and then you see it on film, and I think next time you hit the field, hopefully you're more decisive in everything you do, quicker and more decisive, faster. I think that's the same thing for backs, and I think both Mekhi and Toren have made big jumps that way over the past 12 months, and the other guys are coming right along, too.