

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 4, 2018

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. We'll start with the captains. Pretty much the same group, a little bit of a change, so we've got Parker Hesse, Nate Stanley, Keegan Render and Brady Ross will be our four captains this week. Players select those guys, and I think they do a great job with that.

Certainly looking back, we're pleased with the victory Saturday. It was hard fought, and I thought our guys did a really good job against a tough ball club. We're going to have to work on our improvement now, focus on improvement as we get ready for a tough game with Iowa State. But I thought the guys did a lot of good things, made some good progress, and I'm happy about that.

A couple things I shared with the football team during the course of the last couple days. First thing, as I mentioned Saturday after the game, I thought our guys played hard, thought they played determined, and that allowed us to play through some bumps in the game. There was certainly plenty of those. I thought we played good team football, had good responses for the things that didn't go well, so that certainly was pleasing, and if we're going to be a team that can contend for championship level play, we're going to have to continue to use that to our advantage. That's certainly a positive.

The other part about it, a lot of young guys got a chance to play in-game action, live-game action, and that's something you really can't duplicate in practice, so hopefully they'll take confidence away from that experience and be better off as we move forward here in the schedule, and that's certainly going to be necessary for us.

The mistakes that we did have out there, we played through those, and a lot of those young, inexperienced players were part of that, so I think that's a real part of that, too.

All that being said, we've got a lot of work ahead of us right now, a lot of improvement to make, and hopefully it's taking place right now this week if we're going to have a chance to do well in this game this week. Just fundamental issues right from the start and certainly communication, that was evident in that punt protection problem that we had, so just simple things, basic

things, but those are things that don't always get executed the way they need to be to be successful. Hopefully we'll learn from that.

Shifting gears, right now, certainly our focus is totally on Iowa State getting ready for this ballgame. It's certainly a special game for everybody involved. I think nothing new there. It's a great rivalry, certainly, and one that we're really excited about being part of.

And I think it's not only exciting for our players, for our coaches, for alums, fans in the state, but people across the country. It's just a really great thing for everybody, I think.

The game means a lot for us. It means a lot for all of our team, I think especially for our guys from Iowa. Proud of the fact that we have 12 guys that are starters right now from this state, and basically if you look at our roster, about 50 percent of it is Iowa natives. I think that's certainly important. It says a lot about the commitment that our players, I think, have to our university, and then conversely, the commitment we have to the state of Iowa.

A lot of good things about this game, no question about it, and it's at least traditionally been a really good rivalry, so we expect more of the same on Saturday, and I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. A couple years ago there was sort of a low point there, the game in '16. What have you seen on tape about them that has maybe changed from what you saw --

KIRK FERENTZ: That game is so irrelevant when you talk about the series, first of all. You go back, whatever, '11 on, if you look at that, pretty much outside of that game, it's been a one-possession ballgame. In '15 I know it was a little bit more than one possession, but if you were at that game, that was a one-possession game. That was a tough, hard-fought game. That's representative.

The game from two years ago, it looked like a new team with a new staff and everything was just totally -- and I think it was about two weeks after that where they really started to gain traction, and since then they've been playing excellent football. You can take that tape, but it's really worth nothing for anybody in our

organization. I know that. And hardly representative of what this series is about and what the rivalry is about.

Q. What do you have to do with Montgomery? Didn't have a lot of luck stopping him last year.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, especially in the fourth quarter when it counted, and I told our guys, I don't know that we'll see a better back this season. I don't know who's out there, but we're going to see good players. We always do in our conference. But he's as good a back as you're going to face anywhere in the country. It starts with him -- first thing about it, he's tough. He's a tough, competitive guy, runs extremely hard, and I thought last year when it really counted, that's when he was at his best. He really kind of -- I don't want to say carried the team, but he sure impacted the game in a really positive way.

Q. On defense what do you -- on a zone read like that, which they run a lot, where do you want him to go?

KIRK FERENTZ: The back? Sideways would be good. Yeah, the more he goes sideways, the better off it'll be for us. But he's good at getting downhill. One guy tackling him -- there's a clip I saw last night, I think about four or five guys on our team had a chance at him, guys in white jerseys, and we couldn't get it done. He's a really tough, strong determined guy. Not only does he make yards, but I think what he does to generate energy on their football team, that's what good players like that do, and he's certainly that category of a player.

Q. Did he sneak up on you a little bit last year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, well, he was kind of an unknown. Somebody else the year before had a thousand plus yards, or two years back, whatever it was. I don't want to say we didn't respect him. We respect everybody we play. But we got a firsthand taste of how good he is. Anybody that was at that game last year would say, boy, this guy is a top-notch running back right here, nationally, not just in our state.

Q. A lot of the guys said they're happy to have a game under their belt compared to the Cyclones' situation. In your experience do you value that, like having preparation for a game going into a rivalry or a conference game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't think I have experience in this kind of a deal where one team played and one team didn't. Probably the good news for their side was it didn't take long to grade the film on Sunday. They had five plays on each side, I think. They got done with that, and they're moving into our preparation, so they got a jump on us there. But I've never had experience. I'm not smart enough to know if it was good, bad or indifferent. But it's just one of those things, and it's just

how it shook out, so it's how it goes going into the game.

Q. Building off that, I know you guys have so many resources for preparation and stuff like that, but where you have an opponent that doesn't have week 1 film to look at, how does that adjust things a little bit?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, the closest comparison I can give you, I can't tell you how many years ago, where the team we played in week 2 played someone so bad in week 1 that the film, again, was worthless. You got a little bit of a look at their players, but you really didn't learn much about their team.

If it happens, it happens, and you deal with it. We've got a lot of film from a year ago with a lot of the prominent players that they have playing now. So you know, we use that film to try to study, and then conversely, they got a look at our guys and our new guys and that type of thing. I don't know if that's an edge or not. There's a lot of ways you could argue it I suppose.

Q. When you look at the way Amani played when he started out, you had a lot of equity in him, he was a starter in the spring, he was a starter at camp, you expected him to be there. Was his performance a little bit surprising, and where do you think he stands now going forward?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think I'm not going to say it was predictable what happened, but I think what happened to him is consistent with him. The reason we like him so much, he's high-energy -- he wants to make every play and get to the ball, and you can't always do that. Sometimes you just have to play your position. And I think he was just trying so hard that he hurt himself a little bit on a couple plays, and we just wanted to get him out. He was probably the only guy playing well in the last possession. We had 11 guys out there on the field but not many of them were playing the way they should have played. He made some plays there that were very reflective of the guy we saw over a long period of time. We're hardly ready to throw him off the boat here. I mean, he's had a good week of practice. He'll keep practicing. My guess is he'll be in the lineup at some point. He's a really good football player. Just got to calm down a little bit.

I'm not saying he's Drew Tate, but Drew Tate hyperventilated his first game. Kind of the same thing; some guys just want to do so well, and you try to do too much, and sometimes that works against you.

Q. Were you happy with the way the defense adjusted? Looked like Kristian really picked his

game up, and now you know a little bit more about Jack?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, exactly. I didn't know what to expect. None of us knew what to expect as coaches with the guys that haven't played. A lot of good things out there, and the defense really -- to use Norm's word, put out the fire. They kept us in the game in that first half in particular. A lot of good things out there. Looked like fairly good communication. Guys for the most part were in their spots, and when Amani wasn't, that hurt us a little bit. But that's a big part of playing defense is just knowing where to be and what to do and then being there consistently. Just got to get him to slow it down a little bit. I thought we saw some real positives, and a lot of room for improvement, though, and a lot of things we can still do better.

Q. Do you anticipate any kind of rotation, or is it Jack's job?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, we'll see how it goes. We still have an open mind. I said that, I think, back at the beginning of August and even last week. To me, probably at least for this month, we'll be evaluating a lot of spots, and it could happen in October-November, too, you never know. You know, that to me is what September is for. You practice for X amount of, whatever it is, 15 plus 25 now, so that number keeps changing, but 40 reps of practice, and then you get into game action, you really start to learn about guys, and quarterback is the most prominent position for that. But it's really true at every position. When you see guys in game action and how they're learning, what they're picking up, how they're improving or not improving, then it allows you to make some decisions on what to do.

Q. How do you guys handle offensive tackle now with the guys coming back and guys that played pretty well last week?

KIRK FERENTZ: I see it as a real positive. I mean, I don't mind telling you we had some concerns going into the game with three guys that haven't played very much against a group that was pretty good on film. I thought that experience was really good and valuable for all three of the guys. Couldn't have been more different, the combination. If you just compare and contrast Kallenberger and Ferguson, a fifth-year senior and a second-year redshirt freshmen, two opposites of the spectrum, but both guys I think are in the same boat where they feel a lot better about themselves today than they did a week ago. And again, you can't hand it to them; they've been practicing good, but they had to go out and play and play in front of the crowd.

You know, they had some bad plays, too, but they played through those things, and to me they're practicing more confident the last two days than I've

seen them all season long or any time in their careers, and that's a good thing. We'll let those guys compete, too. The more the merrier. The depth on the offensive line was a big concern coming into camp and it remains that way, but I feel like we're a little further down the road now in a positive way than we were.

Q. Brandon Smith, is it at a point now where this season he went out and played with his hands? Is that one of the things that's really hard to teach a young wide receiver, to come in here and learn how to get open with their hands like that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think it's -- again, it's experience. I'm not making excuses here or making any excuses or offering one up for a player, but he's really young. He's played, he's been out there, but he's really young, and if you count his snaps last year, they're -- I mean, it's not monumental. He's just a young guy. He may be playing a little bit ahead of his time, but he gives us we think the best option out there, and sometimes players get thrust into positions maybe a little bit before they're ready.

But he's got a good attitude. I think he's made a lot of progress from a year ago, and I think if we just stay patient we'll see him improve. Kind of the same discussion with Amani. Amani is a young player as a linebacker. He's a veteran player as a kickoff coverage guy. Sometimes you've just got to go through those -- got to be patient, and as long as guys are working hard and they're showing the right attitude and all that, that gives you a reason to think that there's going to be a good outcome here if we just stay with them and handle it properly.

Q. Does that hurt -- last year you guys proved that you can do that with Hunter. That worked out --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it can be painful at times, and sometimes you have no choice. Last year we had two guys out of high school playing receiver, and thank God Nick Easley was here. But that's who we were, and that's where it was. You grin and bear it and push through it and all that kind of stuff and read about how our passing game is not too good. Like no kidding. But you just keep working through that, keep pushing, we'll get there hopefully.

Q. Ivory Kelly I think left with an ankle, ice on his ankle. How is he doing?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's doing okay. We've got a couple guys that are nicked up from the game, and that's the downside of playing the game, I guess. You're always going to have some guys that are -- right now we'll see how it goes, and hopefully we'll know by the end of the week where we're at.

Q. He's for sure not going to play?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we've got a couple guys that are a little bit dicy, so we'll see where they're at.

Q. Why did this defense improve so much late last year? On film what did they do differently to really accentuate their play?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't want to say it's an underreported -- because I'm not an expert on their coverage, but to me when we look at -- as coaches when we look at their program, they've made vast improvement obviously. They were an eight-win ball club, won their bowl game, and I think a big part of that, and I'm sure Coach Campbell would tell you the same thing, is their defensive play. Pretty sure they were in the top 25. I think they were 21 points a game, and you think about that accomplishment in that conference, that's high-scoring conference, it's very, very impressive.

We play different styles of defense, but I think the commonality is these guys really play good team defense. They play hard, and they're really sound. They're really sound. They're hard to score points against. You know, so I think that's a big part.

You wonder why a team -- we talked about the game, where they were at two years ago, they were not a good team defensively against us. They just didn't look even close to what they are now. But they're playing together. They've got a good scheme, good plan, good coaching staff, and they're really playing good team defense. That's a big key to winning football games.

Q. When you look at Ray Lima up front, he seems to be a really solid cog. Doesn't get a lot of statistics but really holds the point of attack. What's the challenge with dealing with him?

You've got a veteran center, but --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's a good player, good veteran player and good interior guy, and sounds like he's a team leader, as well. He's one of their captains. Should be a good match-up in there because we've got a couple veteran guys and a younger guy. But that's part of the reason they're good. He's an unselfish guy, too, a tough, unselfish tough guy.

Q. Does this game ever get to the point for you where you, okay, here's this game again and you expect a certain amount of noise and hype and all that kind of stuff with this game, or is it different every year?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's changed. Yeah, it's changed a lot, I think. Go back to '81, it was an unhealthy rivalry in my opinion, at least based on what I saw my first trip up there. But the whole world has changed so much in that regard. I think this is really great for the state, you know, and it's been -- outside of the one game, and

then we've been guilty of that, too, but overall, since I got back in '99, there's been a lot of really good ballgames that have gone right down to the wire, and I think that's good for everybody. No question about it. I know there's a perception out there at one point we didn't think this was important. That was highly insulting, really insulting. But you know, you can't do anything about it. You go through all that stuff like you go through anything else.

Q. From your chair, Iowa is 3 million people, Iowa has two Power Five college football programs. What are the challenges to that from your chair, just two Power Five programs, and I know there's probably some talent --

KIRK FERENTZ: It's extremely unique. We have 3 million people in our state, you've got two Power Five teams, and then you've got a really good FCS team, as well, program. I've always thought it was amazing. The years -- you think about three teams -- two teams going to a bowl game and then Northern playing in the playoffs, like in a state of 3 million, that's pretty impressive, and you compare it to some other places where there's one major college, a world of difference. It makes the job a little tougher, I think, personally, but it's been that way for 20 years, 28 I've been around. So that's the way it is, but it's good for the state of football, and the entire state football-wise.

Q. The four guys that were suspended, you mentioned you might have them doing something different this week. What was kind of the -- what did you have them doing instead of playing in the game?

KIRK FERENTZ: This past week? They did community service work. It's a pretty standard rule we have. They got four hours in on Friday and eight more on Saturday and missed the game. But they're in mind and spirit, and they came back Sunday and we've welcomed them back, and they're all doing a good job. Really happy with the way they've handled it. Obviously wish they hadn't been in that situation, but I think they've handled it the way we would hope, and what's most important now is they continue to do that, and I expect that from all four guys. I think they've got a great attitude.

Q. There seems to be kind of this misperception that suspensions are just the game itself, but it seems like there's a lot more involved when you suspend a player --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there is.

Q. Can you kind of talk about that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, there's certain things -- most of these cases it's university protocol that we have or athletic department protocol, which is good, and a lot of

that is educationally based, but then on that, they spend the week on the scout team, so I guess if we benefit in any way, our preparation gets a little better because you get guys that were in the two deep typically on the scout team. And then they do the community service on Friday and Saturday, they miss the game. So there's got to be a price to pay. It's got to hurt a little bit, and there's got to be some consequences, but that's just part of learning and moving forward. Then how you handle those things and how you respond is, I think, very, very telling.

Q. Is Alaric Jackson good to go? I think he had a cast.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's ready to roll, uh-huh.

Q. Kyshaun Bryan, is he ready to go?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's taking a leave right now, so we're going to bring him back at bye week and kind of circle back, see where he's at, and see if he's more prepared to practice.

Q. Iowa State is known to have taller wide receivers. What kind of challenges does that present to your secondary?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a huge challenge for anybody, and fortunately one graduated but the other guy is taller. Unless you have 6'6" DB's, which not many teams do, it's a challenge. It's a real edge, an advantage. It's one thing to have a tall receiver, but when you have a tall receiver that's a good player, that's more important, and that's certainly the case with Butler. He's a really good football player. If we're going to have success this week, we'd better account for him in the game plan and try to do the same thing at the running back, as well, and the quarterback. They've got a bunch of guys that are pretty capable, but he certainly stands out.

Q. What did you see from your defensive backfield? Hooker continues to make plays like he did all last year, but what about the corners? Do you feel like -- did you see enough of them to be confident that they can handle Iowa State, or is it this is kind of a week --

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I'm confident they got through week 1. That's a start, so that's all we can do. But I thought they had a positive outing, did a lot of good things. There was one play in particular that stands out that we could have done a little bit better on technique-wise, again, but that's a learning experience, and hopefully we'll benefit from that. And I'm talking about the first group now. We don't have enough time to talk about the twos right now.

I think it was a positive outing, and then we're counting on Amani to be a good player. He should be a good

player, and we're counting on that, and we're counting on him to be a better player this year. Same thing with Jake. Jake had some young player mistakes last year, but the benefit of playing a second year -- and during the year he was doing this, he was processing and cataloging things during the year, so he was a better player certainly in November than back in September. He's a senior leader on our team, and we're really counting on him to play good football, too, and he will.

Q. Can you talk about I think it was Ross Reynolds got hit with a penalty outside the tackle box, I believe the runner was outside the tackle box --

KIRK FERENTZ: Thanks for bringing that up. I haven't had a chance to call -- I hate calling the league, but I will call, just to -- it's the dumbest rule in football. I think I'm safe in saying that. There might be a dumber one. I can't think of it.

Q. Headphones?

KIRK FERENTZ: To put it in simplistic terms, there's a certain area within the center box where you play football, whether you're an offensive guy or defensive guy, and defensive guys are supposed to know how to use their hands to play cut blocks. They used to teach that back when defense was really important. But now the way they've got this rule structured, defensive guys can just turn and run, and it's ridiculous, and my stance is there's a certain area where they've got to play defense, and if they can't, they should be penalized by getting blocked.

The way the rule reads right now -- I'm glad you asked. I'll take this and run with it. The rule is stated, okay, the way I coached it for however many years I was a line coach, the rule is just the opposite. So if a linebacker turns and runs, okay, you can't cut him. Well, I coached for a long time. If a guy runs, cut him because he can't play a cut block, right? And when you're in the middle you're supposed to play defense. It's a dumb rule, and the bottom line is this: The rule stinks, but the worst part of it is, okay, it really makes it a hard job for the guys that officiate. And I'm not mad at the center judge the other day. I understand what he was saying, and there's another variable tied into it; is the ball in the box or out of the box when the cut -- the ball was in the box, okay, for the record, but the problem is, we put so much on the officials, these guys are humans, and it's just unreasonable. You have rules that are really tough to enforce, and then dumb things happen on the field. It's just -- it's really frustrating. But it's bureaucracy at its best, so I guess I'll have to live with it, huh? We're still going to coach it the same way. It's ridiculous.

Q. Are they still enforcing the celebration -- I watched a few games this year, and it seems like

they're not emphasizing that at all.

KIRK FERENTZ: I guess we're more focused on uniform right now, which I'm all for, okay, but like now you've got to have knee pads down over the knees. In the past I thought that was a rule, they said, no, you just have to have knee pads, you can have them up over your thighs, but now this year we're enforcing that. It's just -- yeah, I think that's still a rule. Yeah, we got called at Nebraska, right? Was that last year? Somewhere down the road. But anyway, yeah.