

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 10, 2019

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Thanks for being here. Certainly, we're pleased to be 2-0 right now and coming off a game where I think we played a real solid football game in all regards in our Big Ten opener. Happy to be at that point. Now our focus is squarely on getting ready for Iowa State, tough preparation here.

Captain-wise, we have the same four guys. We have Nate Stanley, Michael Ojemudia, Kristian Welch, and then Brady Ross is special teams. Injury-wise, Merriweather won't play again. Geno Stone is fine. He came out of the game fine. He'll be ready to roll.

It's my 30th year in the rivalry now. There are a couple of things that are always certainties in this ball game over the years. First of all, it's going to be a really tense, competitive football game, always a challenge. And the other thing, it's always going to be in an excellent environment. I think it's true whether that's here or there. That's always been the case. So that we can count on.

We've got tremendous respect for Coach Campbell, his staff. They've done a wonderful job over there. They've got players that clearly enjoy playing the game and enjoy playing for the staff. When you look at the tape, you can see a couple of things. They've got good players, first of all, they are very well coached. They compete hard. The other part about it, they're going to be a rested football team. We know that going into it.

They're a very veteran football team. A lot of returners not only in the starting lineups but in the two deep.

One commonality we've seen over the last couple of years, they've been playing good team defense. That's helped them be a factor in the conference the way they have been.

And the thing that's new for us is the quarterback. We didn't have the opportunity to face him last year. He certainly has given them a great boost and just has had a tremendous impact on the football team, great leader. You can see that just from watching the tape. They're an excellent football team.

On top of that, it's our first road contest. So that's a unique challenge. I think for a lot of our younger guys that's going to be an experience for them. Have to rely

on our veterans hopefully to help those guys through. But for them to be in a hostile environment, they might as well get used to that. That's going to be part of the year as we go along.

It gets down to us. We have to go over there and be focused, really concentrating on the task at hand, and that one is certainly significant. Again, pleased with the start and know we have a big challenge ahead of us. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. How about Cole Banwart? Is he back?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's back practicing now. I think it's fair to say he'll be able to play.

Q. Are you going to work him in?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he'll be in the rotation at some point. Not sure what that will be yet, but he's ready to go.

Q. Is Hankins okay? He came out a little bit dinged up.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we've got a couple of guys that are hurt right now, like every week. We'll just ride it out and see where it goes.

Q. Any update on Alaric? Do you think he'll be back for Middle Tennessee?

KIRK FERENTZ: I have no idea. He's doing better every day. We've got next week to figure out all that stuff, but he's getting better.

Q. Nate talked about having -- that last year he kind of maybe bought into some of his own hype. Did you guys discuss any of that with him postseason, or is this all kind of his mentality and focus these first couple weeks?

KIRK FERENTZ: With all due respect, I didn't know there was a lot of hype. Seems like there's been a lack of it sometimes. I wasn't aware of that, no. We didn't talk much about it.

As I said pretty consistently, my emphasis to him or my encouragement would just be to enjoy his senior year. Relax a little bit and enjoy it. He's done a good job and worked hard. Thus far in two games, he's really looked like he's been in control and command out there, better than at any point in his career.

Q. College Gameday coming to Ames this weekend. You guys are the road team. Do you feel maybe not as much pressure than if you guys were hosting such a big event in College Gameday? Or do you still feel the same amount of pressure you do when the national spotlight is on you guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: They were here -- I can't remember what year it was. It didn't impact the game. I don't think it will impact this one either. There's always been a lot of hype, if you will, or interest in this game for obvious reasons.

The nice thing about it is I don't think a lot of people outside our state bounds necessarily understand the intensity of the rivalry and just what a great thing it is. So maybe that will add to the spotlight a little bit.

But one thing's for sure, it's been consistent. The game on the field is important to everybody involved, and it's always been challenging. At least internally, there's been a lot of interest and coverage for sure.

Q. How good has Matt Campbell been through that program and this rivalry?

KIRK FERENTZ: The rivalry's been pretty strong and pretty tough ever since '98. It dipped there for a while, but since '98 -- to me, that was a really historic event. Dan McCarney was coaching there then. Certainly since that time, it's been a very heated rivalry, very competitive rivalry. Coach Campbell has just done a great job overall for the program.

Last year, right there in contention, and they will be again this year. 16 wins the last two years, that's not easy to do anywhere. Credit goes to them, the players and the staff.

Q. What kind of challenges does Ray Lima present and the way he plays. You have a young center who's played very well, but he's still learning.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's a big challenge. You talk about a veteran player who's playing good football. They're veteran on both lines, not only, again, the starters, but if you look at the two deep the last couple of years, there's a lot of familiar names in there. He's one of their most improved players -- I'm looking over a bigger window, not just the last couple of weeks. He's a leader on defense, certainly a leader up front. It's going to be a heck of a challenge.

You're playing a team where he's going to get mashed up under center a lot, and that's not an easy task. That's part of playing in the Big Ten and playing college football too. And Tyler knows that, so I'm sure he'll work hard this week.

Q. You had big performances from Duncan and

Sleep-Dalton Saturday. Given how tight this rivalry tends to be, how confident do you feel?

KIRK FERENTZ: For sure, any time you get into games like this, and any big games, which I certainly consider this to be, all those axioms or the old adages prove to be true, and certainly special teams are going to be a big, big part of the ball game.

If Michael can continue to play like that, it was an impressive performance. As I said after the game, both those punters were outstanding Saturday. That would certainly help us. Keith and Caleb have both been practicing really well and doing a good job performing in practice, and Caleb is doing a good job on those kickoffs.

So those things combined, special teams, they're specialists, and if they can continue to play well and play better, that's going to be a good thing for us certainly.

Q. Iowa State is pretty good in the RPO game. What are your guys' general rules when you're trying to defend the RPO?

KIRK FERENTZ: The basics are the basics. There are certain guys assigned to the run. Other people have to respect the pass. It's first things first, like anything you do in sports. But it's easier said than done. The fact that offensive linemen can go down the field in college football, it makes it a little bit more challenging on top of it.

That rule is officiated a little bit more liberally in college than maybe in the NFL, so it just makes it a little bigger challenge. Whatever your responsibility is, you've got to stick to that first and then play the secondary one second.

Q. You guys aren't an RPO team. What would be the sticking point? Why wouldn't you guys consider that, use that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know. There's just only so much you can do some sports. It's like anything else. We pick black uniforms. Some people pick red. It's just what we do.

Q. Iowa State's offensive line has five starters with 114 starts. Obviously, experience is experience, but what does that mean, having 114 starts in a line?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think I read somewhere they left six starters too, which is not an exaggeration. But that is a point that I would emphasize, again, not only the first line guys, but their backup guys have been there for quite a while. It's the same thing on the defensive line. There's no downside to continuity, no downside to experience, especially with the group that plays so cohesively like an offensive line. That's always a good

thing.

And to me that's one of the advantages they have as a football team this season, the fact that they've got a veteran group up front. Their tight ends are veteran on top of that, and then the quarterback has done a great, great job. That's a really good place to start in terms of building a team.

Q. How close was the free safety competition coming into the season between Merriweather and Koerner?

KIRK FERENTZ: If you want to find a silver lining in the injury, both of them have one game experience now. So we didn't lose anything in terms of that.

Kaevon was the favorite in the spring, but Jack's done a really good job throughout spring practice. He was doing a good job last year too, but I think it really started to show in spring practice, and for the first time playing live experience, that was a good start for him. Extremely conscientious, and he's working hard at it, so we're certainly counting on him.

Our biggest concern, I think, is just taking many more hits back there. We're getting a little thin right now.

Q. What do you say to the younger guys on defense that might get their shot depending on what happens?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's so many moments historically I can point to. I can't remember if I mentioned Saturday, at least I was thinking about it, going to the stadium that morning, in '07 over there, that's when Greenwood came in against Illinois and a big win for us. Did a great job filling in. I'm just thinking about position to position there.

Historically we've had so many of those cases, and it's one of the things we try to talk to our guys about all the time. You never know when it's going to happen, when that opportunity is going to come. There's no guarantee it will come, but if you're not prepared and it does come, that's just a bad deal.

That's the reason everybody needs to take ownership, and that's, I think, one of the big challenges in football, quite frankly. When you're a backup, a lot of times backup players will fall guilty of, hey, you know, I'll be okay. Or if I have to play it on the road, that's when I'll really crank it up and get ready. It's a bad mentality. It's just a loser's mentality. You can't do that. It hurts the team if guys are thinking that way, and certainly Jack didn't take that approach.

Q. What is the wide receivers' experience level this year? You talked many times about Ihmira and

Brandon are very new and right off the school bus. What does their growth and emergence, what does that do to the playbook this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're just better players now. Much better players than they were two years ago certainly and even better than last year. It's not the same as what you were asking about earlier, but it just kind of affects how you lean, how you bend as a team philosophically.

Last year our best talent was at the tight end position. So you kind of go where your talent is in some ways, and then everybody else has to fill in around it.

So we're a little bit more able to make people respect us, I think, out wide now than we were two years ago. Hopefully, that will continue to develop.

Q. One of your better stories never gets mentioned in that category is Marvin McNutt, who came here as a quarterback then moved to wide receiver and became one of your best players. He's been working with Brandon and Ihmira on the side from time to time. Do you encourage that? A former player. And can you tell if it's helped at all?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think any time our players either just talk to former players, guys that were good and proven players here that really understand what it takes to be successful, I think that's a positive. If they're working with him, nothing wrong with that either. I don't think any of us set it up, if it was taking place, but, yeah, that's always a good thing.

Dallas Clark and linemen have come through here. When we go right down the list, that's always a positive thing. That's why you like those guys to be around the program because they've walked the walk, they've done it. They know what it is to compete in tough environments and have success. So if they can share something, whether it's a tip on how to play better or a tip on just how to handle environments or handle situations or hardships -- you know, all those things that players go through. I think that's always healthy, yeah.

Q. How is your tight end group coming along, do you feel? You have three catches this season out of that position.

KIRK FERENTZ: They're doing fine. Probably the first thing that comes to mind are the catches Shaun made a couple of weeks ago. Hopefully good for his confidence because he doesn't have a lot of playing experience. So I think that's certainly a positive. Nate's doing a good job, and Drew and Shaun are coming along behind trying to gain on the fly. We'll keep pushing those guys, and hopefully they can help contribute this week.

Q. Do you find this week is one week -- I'm sure there's some weeks where you feel you might have to manufacture some of the enthusiasm. I don't think you probably have to do that this week. Do you feel that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I would hope not. It's like this every year. The guys that have been involved in the series, I think they better understand, obviously, than the newcomers because, until you've been through one, you really can't appreciate it, I don't think. But the guys that have been through it get it.

It's not just Iowa natives. If you're an Iowa native, you have a longer history with this whole thing, but if you're from somewhere else, I think once you get here and get exposed to the whole rivalry, intensity that's involved, certainly, you can have an appreciation for that. So hopefully, our older guys help share that so the younger guys are better prepared for it.

Q. You went almost exclusively four-three last week and the second half of the opener. Was that based on injuries or based on scheme and personnel?

KIRK FERENTZ: As much as any, we're just getting a little thin right now in the back end. I mentioned their two deep, how veteran their two deep is. There's some names in our two deep right now that you'd have to get out your program to figure out who's who. So we're a little thin back there.

I think one thing you want to try to do -- and this goes back to 2000 against Northwestern -- you want to get your best guys out there and guys that can handle the situation the best. So I think first things first in that regard.

Q. Regarding that safety depth, I know Phil mentioned Dane Belton early in camp and Dallas Craddieth was a big recruit. We just haven't heard their names. Do you have guys back filling there?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. We've had guys injured, two that weren't in the two deep, and that's part of it. We'll see how this week goes. This week is about getting to the finish line, and we'll reassess everything next week. We have time to maybe come up for air and look at some stuff.

But, yeah, just getting guys ready. We're scrambling through that now. Every injury makes it tougher, and just spreads you thin, that's all, and affects the kicking game too. That's another area, and some of those names might show up a little bit on kicking game situations this week.

Q. This is probably something you don't give any thought to, but I always felt like you had a good

story when you first experienced the trophy sprint. Minnesota, I think, was your first year. Iowa State and Iowa had that. Now the trophies are kind of moved around to neutral areas in the stadium. I always felt like you kind of like your team to see it when it lost the trophy, just to kind of feel how much that sucks.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it is memorable, for sure. There's probably another word for that too, I think, right? Anyway, that one's etched in my memory forever, the Minnesota one, because I really didn't know what trophies were about. I'd never been associated with one of those except for Little League, and that's a little different deal.

But that kind of impacted my perception of the whole thing. Yeah, we try to do our best to articulate it to our players. The other part about it, nobody owns it this week. We've had it, but it's a jump ball right now. That's how it should be, and that's how it is every time you line up for one of those.

Q. Going back to last week, first of all, have you ever seen a punter punt the way the Rutgers guy did? And how will that help Nico Ragaini? I'm sure he's never faced a situation quite like that.

KIRK FERENTZ: As vivid as my memory is of the '81 Minnesota across the field deal, my memories aren't as vivid about Reggie Roby, but I probably saw some good performances '81-'82 with him. Different style of punting, obviously. Those balls were up there forever.

Yeah, I can't remember -- I mean, that one trick shot he hit. I think we had three inside the 20, or 2 1/2, whatever it is. I can't remember a game like that. It's a credit to him. That guy is a tremendous, tremendous player. He did a great job. Combine both guys and the way they performed, that's pretty impressive.

Yeah, hopefully, it will help Nico. That's about as tough as it gets. A new punt returner, it showed a little bit on Saturday. Hopefully, those experiences will better enable him to be a little bit better moving forward.

Q. Drawing on your experience, what separates the team that has success on the road from one that maybe doesn't achieve quite that level?

KIRK FERENTZ: The first word that comes to mind is maturity, I think. It doesn't have to be that you're a four-year player or a senior, or a junior even, but just the ability to focus in on what counts and just ignore the rest of it because there's going to be a lot of rest of it all week, not just on Saturday. And that's what happens when you go out and travel to a lot of places. That's just the way it goes, but it's that way during the week too.

It's the ability to focus on what is important, keep your mind there. At least when you have time budgeted for it, that's what you've got to do. And if you are distracted by whatever -- surroundings, things that are being written, nice things that are being written about you or negative things -- I mean, all that stuff's counterproductive to moving forward.

Q. Can you think of examples of -- maybe it's not even this rivalry, but any week where emotions or distractions got the best of your team and you've kind of drawn from that experience?

KIRK FERENTZ: First thought that came to mind, quite frankly, was officiating distracting. There was a game when I was in Cleveland, we were down in Kansas City, and we got totally -- our whole team and staff got distracted by the officiating, and we probably blew a chance to win a game because of it.

That's an illustration. That has nothing to do with the environment necessarily. But the bottom line is, if you're thinking about something else other than what you're supposed to be thinking about, it probably doesn't do any good.

Yeah, it can be tough. We go through a lot of situations on the road that are interesting and where the fans really get into it. There's going to be that moment typically in any game on the road. So if you can't weather that storm and regroup a little bit and refocus, it's going to have a bad effect.

Q. What's your -- not necessarily 1981 trophy moment, but what's your moment from this rivalry in all the years you've been in it?

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, I don't know. It's pretty simple. It's like most things. It all kind of gets squeezed down to, when we win, it's a good thing. When we lose, it's awful. That's the essence of competition, I guess, and that's what makes it so interesting and so painful sometimes. We've experienced both. I can just tell you this, it's a lot more fun when you win. I think we all figured that out in third grade. That's why you want to work hard and try to make sure you give it your absolute best.

The worst thing is, if you come up short and know that you didn't do the things you should have been doing to give yourself a chance to be successful, that's when it's really tough.

Q. Did last week's preparation and then game against Rutgers help you in any shape for this team that also plays a three and a four-man front?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't think it hurts at all. This is a very unique defensive package, I mean, very unique in our minds. But the fact is, yeah, they play with three

guys up on the ball, and the center's going to be covered. So I don't think that hurts at all.

And especially again, if you're going to talk about Tyler Linderbaum, every day is a new day for him. I kind of alluded to that back in camp. There's some things, more so in the blitzes and shotgun under pressure, things like that, that centers have to go through for the first time. Every position has them, but that's a pretty visible position. Every experience you garner is something that's going to pay off for you if you use it the right way.

Q. I've heard a lot of people say whoever runs the ball better on Saturday -- and usually in this game -- is going to win. Is it that simple? Obviously, turnovers and stuff, but how important is it being the team that runs the ball?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's not that simple, but I would abide by that theory in every game. If you have a chance to run the football and do it successfully, but we know going in it's not going to be easy. Again, their style of defense is unique. So they make it tough for you to run the ball. We didn't do a very good job of it last year, and so -- and that's true of any opponent. This opponent in particular, we can expect that.

Anybody can make it tough to run the football, so you'd better be able to do something else if that's the case, and you've just got to try to hang in there for the whole 60 minutes and see if you can find a way to work something out.

Q. What makes their style so tough to run against?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's unique. I don't even know who to compare this with. There's a couple of opponents, I can go back about eight years, that were kind of like this, but not really, not the same. I'm thinking about '09-'10 in that area. It was a little bit similar, but it really wasn't. This one's unique. This just takes a lot of work.

Q. Do you think any team can win anywhere in major college football?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think so. You mean, taking a good team somewhere?

Q. I mean, can any major college program be a winning program?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sorry, I was thinking stadiums and environments. I don't know if I can say yes, unequivocally yes, but it's a lot easier in some places. It's never easy, but some places, obviously, have a little better opportunity.

Start with Ohio State. I've told you that story. Went over there, and they were winning so decisively in the championship game, whatever year it was, if you

looked that up. If you had scheduled them in 1989, you'd have a good chance against them, but ever since then they've been good.

There are some programs that have just been good historically, and I think that gives you a heck of an edge.

Q. What about the ones that haven't been historically? That includes Iowa State and including Iowa once upon a time.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it takes people have to be committed to the success of the program, the organization. Like anything you do in life, I think, if you have the right people committed to seeing it out and you get the right people together, anything's possible. I think that was proven here certainly in 1981 -- '78, '79, '81 with Coach Fry and his staff.

I also know this. I know Bump Elliott, Coach Elliott was totally supportive, and I assume the administration was. That was about eight levels above my mode of operation back in those days, but, yeah, I think if an administration and the university is committed to -- if they think that the program, having a healthy program is important, then you've got a chance. If they don't, that's tough too. I've been places where that wasn't the case, and that was okay.

Q. In the stadium, the RPO offense, you've got a pretty small sample size, having only played one game, and most of these guys aren't the same guys as last year. Does it make it hard to prepare on your end just for what may or may not be their game plan?

KIRK FERENTZ: Like I said, we didn't get to perform or compete against the quarterback last year, but we've seen him on film. I think we have a good idea and total respect for who he is. He's a really good football player. Just the fumble recovery he made at the end of the UNI game, to me, that's a snapshot right there. Just a clutch player doing something really well to help his team win.

So I think we have a good feel for that. They've got good guys up front. They've got a veteran group of receivers, a deep group, and same thing with the tight ends. They're working through the running back situation. That's a little bit different. We have a good feel for who they are, and they probably have a pretty good feel for who we are.

I don't know how much guesswork is going to be going on. There's always wrinkles in every early season game, but for the most part, it's going to come down to the team who plays the best, soundest, and plays the hardest probably.