

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Thanks everybody for being here.

Certainly looking backwards for a second, really happy to get the win over Purdue. They played a tough game. I think it's just really representative of conference play. Especially conference play this time of year, October, November, you expect every game to be competitive and tough. I think it's kind of the way it is.

Biggest part of it, I think our guys really battled, fought out there and played hard. Both teams did. I think we saw some of our phases grow a little bit. Certainly have some things to work on still. Happy with some of the growth.

If you look at our special teams as an example, especially the field goal units did a good job both sides of the ball. We punted the ball better than we had the week before. Did a better job covering the punts. Terry Roberts kind of emerged there, did a really nice job. Happy about that.

Beyond that I think our punt returning looked a little bit better as well. Those are all pluses. At the same time special teams-wise we had three penalties. That's just not going to cut it. Had an opportunity to field a kick, get a good kick return potentially before the half, had a miscommunication there. That was a little bit frustrating. Our kickoff coverage was certainly less than what we're looking for.

It's like every week, we have a lot of things to work on. That's what we do on Sunday, look at the things we're doing well, critique those, also talk about the things we need to get better at. That work starts on Monday.

Our focus shifted over to preparation for this opponent, then also trying to improve and shore up some areas where we got to do a little bit better.

With that in mind, turn our sights towards Northwestern. Our captains will be Nate Stanley, Toren Young, Kristian Welch, and Brady Ross special teams.

Injury front, Kristian right now still isn't practicing, so we'll have to see how that goes. I'm not overly optimistic there in that regard.

Didn't put Brandon Smith on the depth chart yesterday. His injury right now looks like it's going to take a couple weeks. We were optimistic maybe Sunday, Monday. We got a test yesterday, so I think it's going to take a little while to get him back out on the field. That's just the way that goes. Unfortunate certainly.

All that being said, again, we're getting ready to go on the road, play a really tough opponent in Northwestern. A couple things about it. You expect every conference game to be tough. Certainly going on the road adds to the challenge. That's part of it.

The bigger part really is we have the utmost respect for Northwestern, the program that they have, I think for good reason. Since Pat took over in 2006, he and his staff have really done a great job.

I think a couple things that really jump out, you look back, they went through a period in the '90s, I missed that, when Pat was a player there. Certainly both of us were struggling in '99. They broke through in 2000, had just a tremendous year. Were co-champs in the Big Ten.

You look since Pat has taken over, they've done a really, really nice job. The bottom line is they've got an identity. I think that's a byproduct of their stability in the program, not only as Coach Fitzgerald has been there, but a lot of stability in their staff. They currently know who they are, what they are, what they're trying to be.

As you look at them over the years, jerseys change, names change, but any time you play them, you're going to play a tough, well-coached team that's going to play hard, really sound, really competitive. We certainly have seen that every time we've played them.

We know it's going to be the same kind of challenge for us this week. It's interesting, you look back early probably since 2015, they've played as well as anybody and had as much success as anybody on the west side if not more so. It's a credit to their program. We know it's going to be a big challenge. We're getting ready for it right now.

Q. How does the passing game change without Smith in the lineup?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's obviously made some big plays

for us. Made a couple on Saturday. His growth has really been fun to watch. He's just developed every time out there. It's taken one of our better threats off the field.

They kind of experienced the same thing, lost one of their receiver as couple weeks back. That's part of football. We've gone through it already this season in a couple spots. You just make adjustments and keep playing. That's the way it goes.

Q. Who do you look for to take Brandon's reps?

KIRK FERENTZ: First thing we'll do is shift Tyrone Tracy out there, he'll start the game at that position. Ihmir will probably be the next man in at that position. Obviously we'll juggle a little bit. Opens up some opportunity on the other side, other positions.

We got a good group of receivers, certainly better than we did two years ago, even a year ago. Just spreads it around a little bit more, a little bit more opportunity for the other players. It's part of football, everybody absorbing part of that loss.

Q. Will Oliver Martin be more of a part of the offense at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just do the math. He's certainly been in the mix, is in the mix. Subtract one good player out of the mix, there's more snaps available for everybody.

He's working right now, certainly in the mix for competition this week.

Q. What does Riley Moss add to the defensive backfield?

KIRK FERENTZ: He played last year. We had a couple guys play as true freshmen last year. It's not entirely new. I think the story there is that he's made a big jump from last year to this year. We saw that in camp, unfortunately he got hurt early in the season, a freakish play. Those are things we get to see behind the scenes, the kinds of improvement and progress a player makes.

He's ascending, playing with more confidence, more decisiveness than a year ago. I don't think he's a much better athlete than a year ago, but he's a better football player. Losing him hurt our defensive football, special teams bigger picture, got thin outside with a couple guys out.

Getting him back is certainly a bonus. I think D.J. stepped in and did a good job. So both those guys are better players than they were a year ago. That gives us a little confidence moving forward.

Q. Frustrating for guys when injuries happen.

Certainly when it happens, the first game of the year, early, how did you see him handle that, knowing he was going to come back?

KIRK FERENTZ: The hardest part about injuries to me are the individuals affected. Boy, there's so many different levels of it. The tough thing about football is you only get 12 games that are guaranteed. You have such a limited amount of opportunities to go out and compete. You work 12 months a year to be ready for those moments.

Career is only so long for a college player. That time is clicking away when the guys are on the sidelines. It's tough for them. Can't say enough about the mental toughness it takes. Takes a lot of teamwork. Certainly the teammates of our guys are really supportive. Then the unsung heroes are the trainers, not only what they do to get players back, help them rehab, get back to a point where they can compete, but there's also a lot of mental work that goes on there. Those are hours when they're off on their own in a quiet place usually. A pretty small group of people looking at that. There's a real psychology around it.

Did a really good job. It's nobody's fault that injuries take place, they just happen. They're part of the game. It's not like there's anything that you can do about it.

I think we all realize it is part of the game. Any time you compete, you can get hurt. That's just part of the downside of this whole thing. But dealing with it is a lot easier to talk about than actually experiencing it. I think all of our guys have done a really good job.

Cole Banwart, same thing, having surgery last Friday. He's not a freshman. That's a hard thing to deal with. But it's part of the game, unfortunately. It's really to me the worst part of the game.

Q. Dane Belton, where do you see him in the mix and do you see him as a guy who maybe doesn't redshirt this season?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think so. We're trying to win. If a player can help us win, that's been our attitude for quite a while now. Whether a freshman or a senior. If they can demonstrate they can find a role, help us win football games, we're certainly going to play them.

I think he made a good showing on Saturday. He'll be able to help us on special teams, too. As long as he doesn't hit a wall here, we'll just keep pushing him forward.

Q. You rotated Dillon and Jack at middle linebacker, is that the plan again this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's how we look at this game, too. Both of them did a good job, both young players.

Obviously Dillon has a year edge on Jack. They both did a good job. Takes a little pressure off both them not having to play 70, 80 snaps. It was really workable.

That's probably one of the good things thus far at least, we've been able to have some moving parts but still play good team defense. That's kind of what we're looking for. Hopefully we can keep building.

Q. How would you evaluate Djimon's play, it seems like he has been consistent all year.

KIRK FERENTZ: He's done a good job. Played well last year. Basically a first-year player on the field, not a true freshman. I thought he built a good foundation last year. He's improving with every opportunity.

Again, that's what we hope all of our players are doing, is growing, taking the experience that they're garnering, putting it to good use. I think he's done that.

Q. From the top down, is this program the one that's most similar to you guys after all these years?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of funny in some ways. At least offensively, we both look different even. If you don't look at football, it looks different than what the two teams line up typically.

But, yeah, I think there are a lot of parallels. I hope that's a compliment towards us in that to me I look across, I watch them, they don't beat themselves. That's the first thing you have to do in football. They rarely mess it up. They play hard. They show up every week. You have to beat them if you're going to beat 'em. Nothing easy about it.

It's going to be that way Saturday. We're going to have to play really good football, really clean football if we expect to win this football game.

I would hope people would say we look like each other. Pat and I don't look like each other. We're not like each other as players. He won awards. Whole different ballgame there.

Q. When you look at the running game right now, where do you feel the strides have been made and where it needs to go?

KIRK FERENTZ: I wish we were rushing for 250 a game in a perfect world. I think we made progress last week. I think things looked a little more cohesive with our blocking. It starts there. There's a lot of moving parts there. Getting A.J. back in the lineup, he looked a little sharper Saturday. Just stabilizing that part of equation will help us. I think we gained a little ground Saturday. But we still have work to do and it's going to be that way for a while.

Q. The running backs, there's a question as to being tentative and patient. Last year they seemed to be a little bit more explosive. Have they made the strides you're looking for?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think all three of them are a little different, different discussions, whatever. We're pleased with what we're seeing. I think all three of the guys are doing a good job right now. Expect them to keep pushing forward.

Q. Do you think Brandon will be back by Wisconsin?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we're looking at probably three, four, five weeks probably ballpark. There's no way to just say when. So wherever that puts us, that's where it puts us. Looked like it might be a contusion, then kind of went south on us.

Q. Where does Levi stand now on the offensive line?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's still in the picture. You like to have the tackle situation stable. To have three guys that can play and have game experience, that's a good thing. He's still in the equation at right guard, too. We're getting a little thin inside with Cole being out, Shooter being out.

He's still in the mix. Every guy right now, I say every guy, probably got about seven guys that might be in the game offensively with the line. They're working hard. They have to be prepared to get in there. You just never know.

Q. You had a lot of experience at corner for right and wrong reasons. D.J. Johnson seemed to play well. The other day he didn't get in. When he went to dime, Terry Roberts got in. Is D.J. healthy?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's healthy, fine. Nobody is mad at him. He's doing a great job.

It's just every game is a little bit different. He's certainly in the mix. He's doing really well. No story there as far as I know.

Q. Did Hankins lose his job? Did Moss replace him?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll let him practice this week, make a decision. We weren't necessarily planning on putting Riley in the other day. He did a good job. No sense taking him out. Kind of that way with every position.

We have confidence in Matt, we have confidence in D.J. If any one of those guys go in, they'll play well.

Q. A.J. is playing a high volume of snaps this year. You talked about diminishing returns. Have you

talked about maybe scaling him back, trying to keep him fresh?

KIRK FERENTZ: I normally don't listen to the fan request line. There's some a clamoring to get him out there and play more. I couldn't risk that temptation. I told the guys, Let's get him out there for 80 snaps a game (laughter).

He's a more mature player than he was. We don't have Parker Hesse over there either. I think that combination of everything, I don't think it's affecting him at all. I think he's enjoying it, playing well. We'll keep playing him.

Great to see John get a sack. Joe Evans stepped in and did a nice job. Zach has done a nice job, too. We have guys behind those guys we can spell him with a little bit. We're not really concerned about fatigue just now, especially this week. A bye week coming up. Take all we can take this week.

Q. TV timeouts...

KIRK FERENTZ: Go get a sandwich, run out and hit a convenience store, whatever. It's awful. It's just awful. But a lot of things have changed in 20 years that I would change back. That ain't going to happen. Just learn to love it. How about killing momentum or the rhythm of a game, gosh.

Q. When you look at Northwestern, they have challenges on offense. You can't judge their defense on who they played. As far as their defense goes, they seem to still be out there battling. What challenge do they present for your offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, about the circumstance, I don't have a memory like an elephant, Coach Fry did, that was one of his sayings. Feels a lot like '16 to me. The sky was falling for them offensively. I think they put 38 on us. Hopefully nobody is falling for that one in our camp.

The stat I'll throw at you, I can't remember the exact yards, like 250 to 245, something like that. They had more yards than Wisconsin. The point is, if you watch that film, you'll see how they've played. They've been playing really good defense. Those two linebackers inside are really good players. They have a good front. Those guys play hard, are really well-coached, do a great job. They're very opportunistic in the back end. They make it hard for you to score points, have done a really good job that way.

Q. They seem to have players there that it feels like 20 years.

KIRK FERENTZ: It does.

Q. What kind of challenge does Gaziano present?

KIRK FERENTZ: You better be good every play because he goes hard, is a really good football player. He keeps the pressure on you. They have some younger guys that do the same thing. He's really a good football player.

They don't give anything easy or cheap defensively. You have to earn every little bit that you get. It's hard to do that offensively, to sustain drives against a team like that.

Q. Michigan and Penn State were tough games. Those guys have each other's backs, your offensive line?

KIRK FERENTZ: I hope they do. I hope our whole team does. I think they do a good job of that.

It's like any position, but line is the only position on a football team, group, that has five guys on the field at once, unless you count the secondary if we're playing a sub package. Because of that, I think there's a little different camaraderie. It's a different group, if you will.

The teamwork is so intricate. I've always kind of paralleled it to coaching a basketball team, not that I would know anything about that. The teamwork, just getting along with each other, knowing each other's moves, all those kinds of things. It's certainly part of it.

The other part is typically in any season you're going to have ups and downs. I've referenced that, when you get in those situations down by 13 points with two minutes left, they're just running downhill in the pass-rush, it's not much fun. It's a hard circumstance.

If you're a lineman you're going to deal with it during the season at some point. My point is there's going to be ups and downs. You just all keep working. If you have a bad day or a bad series, you push through it, move on to the next one, try to correct things.

Q. Levi and Landan Paulsen always seem to be so positive.

KIRK FERENTZ: They're fifth-year guys. They're beat up physically. You name it, they've gone through it. They just really have great attitudes. They're just unbelievable young people.

At the end of the day we're trying to win games right now. It's great to know when guys move on you don't have to worry about them. Those two guys I'm not worried about at all. I'm not sure what they're going to do. It's interesting. Will be fun to watch.

Great guys, so invested in doing things right. I think they serve as role models for all the guys on our football team. We appreciate that. They're playing good football, too.

Q. What do those type of guys do for your program?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's part of the job description for a lineman in general. Not going to get a lot of accolades typically. Again, that's kind of the bigger picture. That's what you're looking for. They represent the program so well in every regard. Proud of both of them. Just happy they've been with us and looking forward to the next couple months with them.

Q. Do you harken back to previous year's film?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's a mix. You always look at especially teams, this has been a strange year because we've played more teams that have the same coaching staffs, not only head coaches but the coordinators, because it makes a big difference.

For whatever reason, we've had more games this year where last year's game were significant, maybe the last two years. When you have those situations, certainly you draw upon those things. You look and see how they approached you. They're doing the same thing to us.

Also you have to look at this year because every team is new team, has a different personality. You start factoring injuries in, position changes, things like that. There's always plenty of work to do.

Now we're further along at least where we have more evidence as opposed to early in the season when you're looking at film from last year, half the guys might not be there.

There's plenty of information to be looking at.

Q. Do you look at their game last week versus Ohio State?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sure, most definitely.

Q. You asked your defense for a couple turnovers last week and they came through, how much can you teach the art of the turnover?

KIRK FERENTZ: Should have asked earlier.

Q. How much time can you spend approaching the art of the turnover, Geno last week did that?

KIRK FERENTZ: He did it a really smart way. Things were pretty secure. You see some people, especially in the NFL, a lot of guys trying to strip a ball rather than make a tackle. Number one thing is make a tackle, got to get the guy down who has the ball. The probability of getting the ball is probably less.

Geno has done a good job of that. He's a heady player. It's overhyped, people go to clinics, talk about turnover

drills. I've seen places where they're stripping balls even if the guy is walking down the street, things like that. It's good for people to be mindful.

I think it really gets down to making sure you're teaching good technique and fundamentals, then you have to be really an aggressive team when you get the opportunity. If you do get a chance for another guy to come in and strip it, that's great.

A lot of times it's more repetition, emphasis as opposed to specific drills, where the head coach is saying, Let's get a couple takeaways this week. I'll walk in tomorrow and tell them we need three instead of two. That would be a great thing.

I think sometimes it gets overhyped a little bit. It's a point of emphasis we talk about all the time. It's a goal for us. Still got to go out and do it.

Q. When you look at the tight ends, what do you think of their progression? Now with Brandon Smith out, is there more emphasis placed on that position?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know we're going to change our offense or tell Nate to look here more than there. You kind of read it, take what the defense gives. Common sense would say the more Nate can contribute and Drew, Sam, Shaun, that group, the better off we'll be.

It's not like we specifically are designing things necessarily. There's certain plays obviously that are going to give those guys a better chance. I don't think you're going to see any wholesale changes with one player down. We've had several guys go down now. We're going to kind of absorb it, keep pushing forward.

Q. A lot of talk about the offense the last few weeks. Is there any common trend that prevent you guys from being in the red zone?

KIRK FERENTZ: Kind of ironic, because I thought we were in the top three. We're in the top as far as red zone scoring, right? The trick now is to change that percentage. That's the trick.

That was a story on Saturday, in my opinion. We had nine points. Instead of 9-0, it could have been 13. It was 9-7 at one point. But 13-7, throw another touchdown on top of that, 16 or 14, 17-7. Those kind of things make a difference if you're playing with a bigger lead.

Happy to get field goals. Keith is doing a great job. We'd like to change that percentage a little bit. First thing you have to get down there. I was really pleased. We took the ball I think seven and a half minutes the

first drive, took it down, got points. That was good.

It's certainly better if you can get touchdowns. You're playing teams that are good in red zone defense, too. Makes it a little bit tougher.

Thank you.