

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, October 23, 2018

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here.

Looking back quick for a second before we get going to Penn State. In general, Maryland I think presented a unique challenge for our defensive football team. I thought the staff did a really good job and the players did a great job of having a plan, most importantly executing it. Took a lot of precision. Really proud of their effort. To hold any Big Ten team scoreless is impressive, an explosive team like that, it's a good credit to our guys.

Offensively we knew it was going to be a challenge going into the game weather-wise, anticipated that. Until you get into the game, you're never quite sure how challenging it's going to be. Same thing, I think the players and coaches did a really good job adjusting to the conditions, played it about as well as they possibly could play it. Did a good job there.

I would say the same thing about our special teams. They really played unaffected by the weather. The weather certainly is a big, big factor. Happy about all those things.

Also happy the fact we played penalty-free. That was big. We were coming off a game where we were a little sloppy in that department. As we move down the road, it's true both sides, looking back or moving forward, playing clean football is really important. I think that was a positive step for us.

Moving forward, for the Penn State game, our captains are Hesse and Stanley, Render and Gervase.

Interesting in contrast to the last couple weeks with Penn State, we've played them three straight years. I think we know their personnel, their coaching staff, vice versa. I'm sure they feel the same way about us. A little bit different in terms of our preparation. I think it makes it I don't want to say easier, at least there's some familiarity there. Again, I'm sure they feel the same way.

One thing about playing Penn State, this has been true for a long, long time, you're guaranteed they're going to have good players. They've recruited well forever up there. Tremendously gifted, tremendously athletic.

They have good size, speed, talent. That's a given.

The other part about it, any time you go to State College, you're going to play in a great venue. Challenging place to play, great college venue, loud crowd, enthusiastic crowd. All those things are constants. It's going to certainly be the same this week for us as we get ready.

I think really what it gets down to is us doing a good job with the things we've done a pretty good job of this season. We've prepared well for the most part during the course of the year. We've shown up and played pretty hard. That's what it's going to take moving forward here.

I've said it many times, I'll say it again, I think our seniors are doing a great job. Not a large senior class, but they're doing a great job of providing leadership. A lot of young guys joining in with them. For them to get the younger guys onboard is helpful. I think it's added to our better practices, better preparation, better team discipline. Those are things that are going to have to continue if we're going to be successful this week certainly.

The biggest thing I think moving forward on top of our preparation is staying focused. That's always a challenge, not only in college football, I think all levels of football. Certainly when it comes to college football, it's a challenge any team faces.

You look around the country every week and see scores that maybe surprise you, catch you off guard. I think it's the nature of college football. Biggest part of the challenge, not only matching up for your opponent, but also being focused, making sure you're spending the time you have to spend, not getting distracted on things that have nothing to do with the ballgame. That's an exercise every week. We're leaning on our leadership base to really help us as we move forward.

The only other thing really to add is health-wise we have a couple guys nicked up in the game. I think everybody does at this time of year. On a positive news front, Jack Hockaday is on the field, two days out there. Good to get him back. Thin at the linebacker spot. Same thing on special teams. That's a positive for us certainly.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. McSorley has been relying more on his running ability as of late. What kind of challenges does that present to the defense?

KIRK FERENTZ: Whether it's how they're trending right now, you look back three years, at least for us, going back two seasons prior to this one, he's a dual threat. He can beat you with his hands or his feet or his arm.

I think beyond that, the thing most impressive to me is just the way -- what he brings to his team. I think it's true of everybody. A really good quarterback brings a lot of value to the team, are meaningful to a team's success. I think he epitomizes that. Putting my tie on down there, thinking about it, you have two quarterbacks that are good quarterbacks in this game, very different quarterbacks, but neither one of them haven't gone to elite camps. I don't think they got any awards coming out of high school for being great quarterbacks necessarily nationally on or the recruiting front. They're good football players that have blossomed into good college players.

His case is really that, an illustration of that. I think he was probably being looked at more as a defensive player, as I understand it initially, in the recruitment phase. He's a tremendous quarterback. Bottom line, he's a winner. Every time he's out on the field, they have a good chance to win.

Q. When you look at your third down passing numbers, if nothing else, proficiency, one of the best in the country right now, whether it's getting first downs on third down passes, chunks of yards. How do you explain that? Something you scheme for in April, translates into execution?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think there are a lot of factors. One of them is just the continuing our experience level is a lot better than it was the last few years. Especially last year, we were so young at all skill positions, offensive tackle positions. That makes it tougher to be successful on third down.

We've talked about that. Beyond that I think our coaches have done a good job coming up with a workable plan for third down. Most importantly our players have executed. Then tie that in with it having success and first and second downs. You're not always third-and-seven or greater, those types of situations. If you can control those, obviously your proficiency goes as the down and distance markers are a little bit better for you.

Q. How valuable is Parker Hesse?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's extremely valuable. I'm not

promoting or campaigning for him being MVP of our team. In a lot of ways you can make that argument because he's such a strong, quiet leader on our football team. I don't know if 'quiet' is the right word. Parker is not necessarily outspoken, overall outspoken, not overall demonstrative with his actions. His steadiness, his determination, just his intensity and his work ethic are really rare. He's just a very special guy.

He played at a very young age, probably before he was ready. Flashback to that championship game he was playing against first rounder who went to the NFL and played well as a rookie, is continuing to play well, he's out there competing against that guy, giving it everything he had. Now you look at the growth and progress that he's made since that time.

Everything about him is quality. Any young player in our program, if they would follow his lead, that would be really well-advised. I can say that about a lot of our guys, but he's run the race and he's run it really well. Boy, I'm thrilled he's on our football team.

Somebody asked about the height of our D-line. I think we minimize sometimes how tall he is. I got in the elevator, in Indiana, whatever, I ended up in the D-line elevator. You think about Parker being my height. You get next to him, you realize he's not my height. Other guys are so tall, he looks like he's my height. Got a lot of good things going for him.

Q. Have you observed experience to be really the key on third down situations?

KIRK FERENTZ: It sure helps. If you get a freshman phenom that can light things up, make plays by himself, that's a good thing, too. He can be any class. You get a top recruit, that might help boost your numbers a little bit.

It's really not the neighborhood we live in typically. It's about us trying to do things well as a team. I think certainly we saw Brandon make a really nice grab the other day. He made that same play during practice I think Tuesday or Wednesday, I can't remember exactly. Same play basically.

When you see those things in practice, translate to the game, you're talking about a guy who has a good skill set, only in his second year of playing, year and a half, when those things start to happen, I'm pretty sure if he had made that play last year, it would have been luck, not practice or skill. So that's a good thing.

When you see those kinds of things start to set in, that's encouraging. We have that at a lot of positions when you talk about guys that are impacting third down.

Q. Hockaday back, good thing?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a good thing.

Q. Do they still start?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we probably will. We're playing pretty well right now. Just to get him back, history, recent history, that we're going to need everybody. The good thing with Jack and Kristian, they both have a lot of position flexibility. Jack has a lot of flexibility, as does Kristian. We were pretty thin last week, that was a little concerning the last couple weeks. It's impacted our special teams also. We had Dillon Doyle out there on kickoff team a couple of plays, made two very nice plays. We've had to throw him in the punt protection. We're getting stretched pretty thin.

Q. Hankins is back?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. He's not 100% right now. We'll see what it looks like by the end of the week. He's not 100% right now.

Q. Keegan rotating at guard last year, move him to center this year. Is it a case where you're taking a good player and putting him in a position that stimulates him upstairs, cerebrally?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think just talking about Parker, it's kind of the same thing with Keegan maybe. He played a lot as a young guy for us, primarily at the guard positions. We graduated really good center. First question going into last spring is who is going to stabilize things in the middle. We ask our center to do an awful lot up there, mentally, making calls, communication. Keegan seemed to be the best candidate.

He played it in the past, was a backup. He's really done a good job with that. He's playing really well. But beyond that, talk about the leadership that guys add, I've talked about the seniors, but Parker really gives it to us as a whole team. I think Keegan is clearly the leader of that group inside.

Two seniors next to him, Fergy on one side, Ross on the other, two young tackles. The rest of the guys in the group are pretty young. He's our most experienced guy, most confident. He's obviously the hub of the group, literally and figuratively. He's doing a really nice job up there with those guys.

Q. Recruiting Parker, you weren't fighting off any big schools to land him, he's only 200 pounds. What attracted you to him?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a little bit like we've talked about Riley Moss last week, Kelvin saw him play early season, sometime in September. Then when Parker, I remember it was our bye week, had to be. I remember Jim and LeVar went up and saw him play. I can't

remember who they were playing. They drove to see him. I talked to those guys about 10:30 that night to see what they thought.

He had been in camp. We really liked him. We weren't sure what he was. Thought he was just a football player. They got to watch him play, especially on defense. Even offensively he was a tough leadership type guy. They both were very excited about him. That's when we decided to offer him. That's when he decided not to commit. That's when I started wondering. I know Mark Farley is from that same home town, figured he and his mom had dated (laughter).

This is vintage Parker, too. Waited till after the championship week, came down, committed. He didn't want to take attention away from his team. That's how he's wired. It's another guy from the '50s. Guys don't do that right now, but that's how he was thinking all the way through. Being around him for four plus years, you can see how he thinks. That's just how he is.

Q. How is your pass-rush, how is that starting to shape what the other offense is trying to do to you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Every now and then we get in that situation. Pretty good group in '09, 2010. Difference with this group is we have more depth than we've ever had, at least that I can remember. Those guys are fresher out there on the field.

Any time you can get pressure without having to bring an extra guy, not that we won't do that, I think that's really beneficial. Any time you know they have to focus guys to block your guys, that's a positive.

We've been able to have that. Whole new challenge again this week, all these guys that are playing for Penn State, they've played, they've been there. They've handled us pretty well. We got a big challenge in front of us. Then you have a quarterback that can get out of contain really easily. Does a really good job of that. Whole different challenge for us.

Q. What do you think of the way the offensive line is coming together? Last week you had your best rushing performance against a physical front. Do you think it's coming together the right way? Do you like the progression or need to see more?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's always more to do, always things we can get better and more proficient at. We are definitely moving in the right direction. They're maturing. Meshing pretty well.

Pleased about what we've done seven games into it. Now we're playing a front, if you're going to talk about

Penn State's defense, starts up front. They got a lot of guys that are challenging to block. Understand leverage, understand good movement, they're tough. It's going to be a challenge for us.

I like the way we're moving right now at least. I like our attitude certainly. Tim is doing a really good job with those guys.

Q. You had two guys starting, two new guys, did that change the longer windows looking at freshmen? Does that allow you to keep guys in more competition situations in practice?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that probably helps. But also coming into the season, as we knew this year, we didn't have any true experienced players at that position. If Desmond was still hanging around, any of those guys, it would have been great. We lost Desmond, Josh. Josh is probably an illustration. A guy that came in with one start under his belt, played really well.

We didn't know what to expect, quite frankly. We started out the way we started out, then we hit some injuries, what have you. Right now it's just sitting the way it is.

The good news is we have two guys, we've seen them play on the game field now, whereas a month ago we hadn't seen them play. At least we know more about them, feel good about what we've seen thus far.

That being said, with any new, young players, you're going to have some ups and downs. We realize that. They practice well, compete hard. O.J. is just about full strength. Hopefully we'll get Matt back quickly. That would really help us a little bit.

Q. Feels like you guys are keeping it as an active competition. Is that right?

KIRK FERENTZ: Doesn't hurt. It's true at every position. I think it's really good at every position. It just encourages guys to practice more, harder, more detail, that type of thing. Age old in sports. Always been the best way to have good practices, is when guys understand that if they're not clipping along the way they need to, maybe somebody else will get a chance.

Q. How valuable is Jake Gervase's experience?

KIRK FERENTZ: If we were banking on two things coming into the season, it was that we'd be solid up front, and I think fair to say the older guys kind of felt like we knew what we'd get, although Sam Brincks has continued to ascend. Then pleased about the rise of a couple of the younger guys, Chauncey sticks out, also A.J. is getting better every week. That's been good to see. Cedrick is playing better than he was.

The other thing we were hoping to bank on is being solid at that safety position. You have Amani on one side, then Jake has really been good back there. I think we were banking on, hoping for. A lot of times I talk about the center having a lot on his plate, free safety, too. A couple things maybe he got nailed on last year because of inexperience, those are things that now he's anticipating them. He's not making some of those same mistakes. That's a big part of football, anything you do, not making repeat mistakes. That's the benefit of experience. There's some players that are experienced that just don't learn. Jake certainly has done that.

On top of that, I talked about leadership with Parker and Keegan also. Same thing about Jake, he's a real active participant in that role. He's eager to take ownership back there. The guys look towards him because he is an elder statesman, if you will.

Q. Kaevon Merriewether, played his fifth game. He's in for the season. Didn't play much football. Basketball player mostly in high school. What did you see in him? Why would you want to play him?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm only laughing because the guys we really liked at safety were taken by Michigan, Michigan State, Detroit area, Ohio State and Penn State. No, I mean, we just got to look at guys that we thought. He was a young football player, but a veteran basketball guy. The time I saw him, it was actually on the basketball court. Playing on a really good team. He looked like he belonged out there.

Just one more of those cases where we saw a guy with size and speed, seemed like he had ability and attitude. Everything checked out. We just figured we'd take a shot at him.

He's done a good job. He's not ready to be in there full-time by any stretch. We made a decision he'll play a little bit in roles hopefully. He's playing on special teams. That's how a lot of our guys got started there. He fits that mold of guys flying under the radar that we thought were good prospects.

Q. What is your plan with the true freshmen? Is it fluid?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it is. You've been reading my notes or what (laughter)?

We talked about that this week actually. In a perfect world, we had to play some guys early, some guys are playing, we made that decision, three of them are defensive backs, but we were young coming in. Last week Dillon got thrown in there basically because of the injuries at linebacker. We're starting to get thin at some spots. He's probably a good illustration.

We are well aware of the four-game rule. Perfect world you want to wait till November, then you have four games to play with it. Also we're trying to win right now.

I think our attitude really is if somebody can go in there, if we have a need, somebody can help us, we're going to play them regardless. Then we'll deal with it at the end of November if it's a factor. If it means a guy plays in five games, that's a decision we'll have to make because we're going to be trying to win then, too.

We're far enough along where we know enough about those guys in that pool, the other part is how does that pool look relative to injuries, that type of thing.

Q. Conversations with you about Rastetter, bringing him back. Saturday seemed like you were skeptical.

KIRK FERENTZ: Bringing him back? He was always coming back, I just didn't know if he was going to be the starter. He we talked about competition earlier, clearly at that position last year, nobody took the reins. But to his credit, he has taken the reins.

To me, that's college football. That's why it's so hard to predict what teams are going to be good, all those types of things. If a guy ends upcoming through, playing well, you got a chance to maybe have a good team. I think that was one of our biggest wild cards coming into the season, was the punting.

You know, it's a player's job to have a plan and work that plan. It's a coach's job to support him in that plan, make sure he's got a good plan. But ultimately it either is going to happen or isn't going to happen. If it does, you have a chance for some good things to happen. He has a chance right now to be a really good punter for two years. He did a great job Saturday. Not only had to do it twice, but those were both very, very important punts.

I'm pretty sure in saying that he -- I can't prove it, but I sure would have been more nervous last year. I wasn't nervous at all Saturday. I felt like we were going to be okay. He has a maturity now he didn't have last year. That comes through a lot of hard work, sometimes tribulation. Tough, but you have to go through it.

Q. What did you see in Geno Stone during recruiting?

KIRK FERENTZ: We talked about Kaevon. Now talk about Geno. My first question when I saw film was, What is wrong with this guy? Did he rob a bank. He looked like a good player to me. I know he's not quite fast enough, maybe not quite tall enough. We said the same thing about Micah Hyde. Not comparing the two

yet. He does a lot of things really well. That's where the similarity is in my mind.

Micah wasn't -- I wouldn't call him a flashy player or wow player. I wish we had 30 of those guys on a team like him. He was so good as a football player.

Geno is a little bit understated, but he's got a good energy to him. Again, he's not the tallest guy, fastest guy, but I think he's a pretty good football player. For what we do, he fits in pretty well. Seems to be our kind of guy.

Q. A decade ago you had a couple of pretty big signature wins against Penn State. '08, it seemed to kind of put a stamp on the season, elevate your program. '09, down 10-0, come back and win. What did those wins do for that group of players?

KIRK FERENTZ: Two kind of different circumstances, just because in '09 we were a more mature team. The '08 game, I think everybody was getting ready to throw dirt on us. If they hadn't already started, they were getting ready to fill the hole. We were 3-3, right? That was off the Illinois loss. Everybody started doing the math, these guys are going to be 5-7, if that.

Anyway, every game is a new adventure. That team was trying to find their footing, whereas I think we had our footing in '09. But I'll tell you, as big as any of them was 2000. We were well-documented going into that season, that game, took double overtime or single, I can't remember which. Hanson comes up with the ball.

But the commonality is we played a good team, we played well. That's going to be the same thing. Circumstances are different this time than those. But the commonality is we have to play our best football Saturday to have a chance because it's a tough environment and they're a good football team. If you can do that, you're going to feel good about yourself. That's part of the climb if you're going to be a team that has a really, really good season.

Q. Seems like talking to the players they cherish this opportunity, five-game stretch ahead. How hard is that to develop at this point in the season?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's what you're working for. If we were sitting here 3-4, 4-3, which is entirely possible, too, it's that close as you know, then you're fighting for a different kind of pushing forward. That's what we were looking at in '08.

I think all of us are smart enough, we're playing a really talented football team, a really good team that's used to having success. We know there's a challenge there. I think anybody that's playing in the Big Ten, that's what you're looking for. We also realize last week was a

huge challenge. It was every bit as important as this one in our minds as we looked at it, how we're trying to get ready. That's what you have to do.

The bottom line is you know week in, week out, it's going to be that way for the next four weeks beyond this one, is that they're all going to be tough to win. If you're not giving yourself a chance every day of those weeks, then you leave the door open for failure. Boy, it happens all the time. It's just so easy to point to examples.

Q. Now that Amani Jones has slipped to third line middle linebacker, any thought of flipping him to the other side of the ball?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's not a discussion we're having right this second for sure because we've been so fluid at linebacker. First thing he's doing it really playing well on special teams. That's of great value to us. We're always going to look at personnel and all that. I don't envision that happening. It's something that could happen. Right now we're full speed ahead of him playing linebacker.

Q. McSorley made a couple good plays with his feet last year. How concerning is that with all the weapons they have?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really tough. I've said it before, when you think about Braxton, some of the guys like that, it's like playing 12 guys when you face those guys. He can make a play out of nothing. He's got that ability. That's why he's such a dangerous performer.

Again, I think beyond what he's doing statistically, running it, throwing it, just the value he brings to that football team. If he's in the huddle, I can't read minds, but my guess is all 11 of those guys felt like they were going to get it done last year against us. Obviously we were hoping it was going to be the other way. We were trying as hard as we would. Somehow they prevailed, came up with the last play. It literally was the last play of the game.

You have to try to do your best each and every play. If there are a couple plays along the way before you get to that last one that can make a difference, which there were a couple in there, we played a little bit better on this one, done this a little bit differently, maybe it doesn't come down to the last play.

When you play against a guy like this, you have to understand it could be that, if in fact you're in the game. First of all, you got to be in the game. Then the challenge is to try to end it out.

Q. When you recall recruiting Julius Brents, did you have discussions with him about the social

justice? One of his best friends was killed in Indianapolis. Did you talk to him about that at all?
KIRK FERENTZ: Not specifically, no. I mean, what can you say, right? Life is not fair. We've all realized that. That's a tough example. Life is not fair. But you got to keep living, too. You got to do something for yourself.

Thank you.