



**University of Iowa Football Media Conference
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Coach Kirk Ferentz Press Conference**



KIRK FERENTZ: God afternoon to everybody. Happy Election Day to all of you.

I'll just take a minute and look back a little bit over the weekend and then we'll talk about Michigan State a little bit and our preparation for them.

Just like Saturday, we're disappointed with the outcome of the last ballgame. I think looking back, looking at the film we saw some improvement in certain areas and I think we have improved as a football team over two weeks. I think we have the potential to become a good football team, but certainly there's work to do right now.

Standing here right now, we've had two one-possession losses and it's like any one-possession loss, there's a handful of plays in both games to really decide the difference between winning and losing and typically it's in all three phases. That certainly was the case again on Saturday. Like any game, it's a team effort.

So it's a team win or a team loss, and the bottom line is, I think all of us can find ways to do things a little bit better, whether it's coaching, or any one of the phases, offensively, defensively and special teams. That's where our focus has to be.

Our guys have done a lot of good things over the past six-seven months. Certainly very unusual circumstances, unusual times. I think the guys have handled it well day-by-day, week-by-week and where we stand right now is, what we need to do is keep pushing forward and see what we can do to try to get over on the winning side of things, and it gets down to focusing on improvement and that's every

practice, every day, not looking too far down the road and doing a better job in the detail. That's what we need to be doing right now as we move forward.

So as it stands right now, we are an 0-2 football team. Nothing about that feels good. But our focus and encouragement to our players is to focus on the remaining 80 percent of the season. There's a lot of football left, and all of us know that we need to play better. Hopefully all of us realize that we can play better and that's our goal as we push forward.

Moving on to Michigan State. We still have the same five captains this week: Gholston, Niemann, Sargent, Linderbaum, and Duncan.

Injury-wise we had a couple guys banged up a little bit on Saturday like you would expect in a game, but I think everybody has a chance to be ready to go this week, so we'll see how the week pans out. We've only been on the field one practice so far.

And as we look towards Michigan State, certainly a lot to talk about with them. First of all, we haven't played them in a couple years and they have a new coaching staff. Coach Tucker has done a great job up there in short time and talking about crazy circumstances for a new staff, I think they have done a wonderful job already. It's been a few years since we have played them, but I think we are fairly familiar with a lot of personnel through recruiting and watching them on crossover film.

They are coming off a really big win against an in-state rival. That's always a big thing, a trophy game. They certainly played well last week, deserved to win, and the big thing is that they are playing well and they are playing hard for the new staff, so things are coming together very well for them, no question about that.

The other obvious thing apparent from their game, they made a lot of big plays especially in the passing game, quarterback, receivers had a big day and that was really the story of the game. That really gave them a chance to be victorious and a great effort. We have a big challenge on our hands. We realize that fully and need a good week of practice, a different week of practice, certainly.

It's interesting, we have three weeks that are going to be different. This is the first of those three that are a little bit unusual and we just have to make the adjustment. It's the same thing for all the opponents we're playing in those weeks. Those are the challenges ahead and hopefully have a great week and we're looking forward to getting back on the field on Saturday.

Q. In what ways is your preparation altered? Are you moving your Wednesday to Thursday, or have you changed anything dramatically from what you usually do?

KIRK FERENTZ: Like most college teams, we work pretty hard on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Those are our heaviest lifting days if you will, on the practice field and then you start to taper back. I think that's the biggest thing is today would have been more of a heavy practice day and we don't have that opportunity.

We just have to slide things a little bit and we'll taper off at the end of the week because of the close proximity of the game, as opposed to working today.

It is what it is and we'll deal with it.

Q. With what happened with Ihmir the other night, the two transfers last week, another transfer today in Calvin Lockett, does that give you pause for any reason, those kind of chain of events?

KIRK FERENTZ: I look at them all separately. Basically two categories. You have three guys that have decided to transfer. Me personally, not totally shocked. I'm disappointed. Was hoping all three would stay with the team.

I think there are two commonalities with all three of the players. They are all from distance, far from home. I guess maybe another commonality, they are all fairly young players. Lock's a little bit older than the other two, but they are a distance from home, so that's part of it.

I think the other similarity is all three weren't in the two-deep either of the first two weeks. But all that being said, it's disappointing because all three of them were doing well. All three are good people and good players. I think they had good potential. Shadrick Byrd played on our kickoff team in the first game. So that came as a little bit of a surprise, but not totally.

If you look around the room, he has some other guys that are pretty good, too. I think a lot of times this type of action happens more so after spring practice when you go through 15 days and it becomes a little more apparent what the roster looks like, who is in the two-deep, who isn't what has to take place.

So I'm not so sure this is a real unnatural thing. It's just the timing, I would attribute it to just what's happened over the last seven-plus months, not having spring practice.

Nonetheless, we don't want any player in good standing and good guys to leave the football team, but that's their choice, too, and you don't want them here if they are not totally invested, either so that's not a good thing.

Ihmir's incident is a separate incident. We haven't had many of those over the last however many years. It's very disappointing. Ihmir is very remorseful. I don't think he fully realizes just the potential danger of the situation first and foremost, not only to himself but to other people, and it's a regrettable decision that he made, so he'll deal with it.

I've known Ihmir for four-plus years now. He's a tremendous person and a great team member. For me personally, this is very uncharacteristic of him and surprising. It's something he did and it's a bad decision. It's like all of us in life; you make a bad decision, you have to live with it. I think he'll push forward, that's my sense right now, but we'll see how things pan out.

Q. Can you talk about what you've seen from Rocky Lombardi on the film you've seen, were you interested in him and did you recruit him very hard?

KIRK FERENTZ: Certainly. He's an in-state player, one of the better players in-state his senior year. I was trying to remember how many years ago, they had a good lineman at the same high school that went to Michigan State probably a decade ago now. They have recruited the state of Iowa in the past. I don't know if they will in the future.

Rocky is a tremendous young player, tremendous young person. Was an outstanding competitor in a couple sports in high school. We knew about him and tried to recruit him and he's done a great job up there. Played pretty extensively a couple years ago when his starter was hurt, and like most players, he was a better player than he was two years ago. He's done a really nice nobody, and they had some unbelievably just great, big plays the other day that really made a big difference in the game, so he's doing a good job. You lead your team to a big win like that against an in-state rival, that's a big deal. Credit goes to him on that one.

Q. Looking back to your first year here as a head coach, was that a bigger challenge because of who you were replacing and how did you handle the challenge of being the guy that replaced Hayden Fry?

KIRK FERENTZ: Just taking over any program is a big challenge. And obviously this situation -- I was familiar with it because I had worked here for nine years under Coach Fry, so I looked at that as probably a good thing, because at least I had a feel, at least I thought I had a feel for the program and the state and what it took to be successful.

And I've said this many times before: a lot of my views and vantage points about what it takes to be a successful college program were shaped because of Coach Fry. He had a tremendous impact on my life and I was a young person at that time.

And then as far as handling it, whether it's a legend like Coach Fry or somebody else, but especially in his case, I just felt like the statement I made was, you don't replace somebody like that. You just follow them. I think it's like anything you do in life. You just try to do the best you can within the framework of your personality and your vantage points and try to do the best you can moving forward. That's why you got selected for the job and just try to do what you think is best.

But you have to be yourself. You can't, especially a person like Coach Fry with his personality and just all the traits that made him so unique and so special. To try to copy him other than some of his beliefs that would have been, I think probably short-sighted.

Q. On Saturday, Kaevon Merriweather made a start at strong safety and it appeared that he had a pretty good game and had a tremendous hit. What are your thoughts on the way he performed and do you anticipate him maintaining that position?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll see how it goes as we move forward. A lot of it's just matchups and your opponent, what they do offensively, that type of thing and then also, it's not just about Kaevon, although he was a factor in that. It's about getting

your guys in the best positions for them individually, so it's a little bit more of a complex equation.

We really feel good about Julius. We feel good about Kaevon. We feel good about Dane.

So it's a little bit of a luxury in I think we've probably got five guys we feel are starters or six guys. So that's a good thing. This whole thing is very fluid, so we'll just keep pushing forward and see what takes place and what adjustments we have to make.

Kaevon in particular, I thought he got off to a good start and then he kind of dipped a little bit. I thought he drifted a little bit, just his focus and concentration and he's come back and done a nice job, and not just the last couple weeks but over the last couple months. You see him hitting stride and grown into the kind of player we thought he might have a chance to be. Just pleased with his growth and progress.

I can say the same thing about Julius. I can say the same thing about Dane and the other guys, although Dane hasn't really dipped off at all. But anyway, it's been good to watch Kaevon's development.

Q. Obviously this is a strange year, different year for you guys, you get off to an 0-2 start. How do you keep the team together, because obviously with the weird year, it could slide pretty quickly and how have your leaders stepped up in this situation?

KIRK FERENTZ: It can slide in any year. So this year is unusual, but we're dealing with it on a week-to-week basis, day-to-day basis. As you guys know, I tell stories, I've been around long enough that I've kind of gone through things similar to this at some point.

We were 3-0 in 2008 but pretty soon we were 3-3 and we were 0-3 in the conference. That's probably the closest equation I could give to you this situation. Didn't feel very good being 0-3 in Big Ten play. Didn't feel real good being 0-1 or 0-2 that year either. But that year ended up being one of the most enjoyable years I have ever had in coaching. That team, not that you rank your teams or anything like that, but I just have nothing but fond memories about that team and it goes right back to the point that you just made. It was all about our leadership, and it came from a lot of different places, a lot of different levels, but we were 3-3.

We were 0-3 in the league. We had three one-possession losses, straight. It's hard. It tests you in a lot of ways and opinions on the outside, all that stuff. It's all about what we do internally. If our focus stays where it needs to be, and it never changes. It's all about trying to get better this week and see what we can do this week and play our best this week. That team bought into that philosophy and they just kept pushing and we came out of it. Got a big victory and then another big victory. Had a disappointing loss but they bounced back from that and pushed right on through.

That's what I alluded to earlier in the comments. There's a lot of football in front of us and a lot of season in front of us. What we need to do is grow and find a way to push this thing over the top. All you've got to do is look at our opponent. They did a

great job of that week one to week two over the last two weeks. That's what the game is all good.

Q. Ihmir, is his suspension for just this week or have you decided on that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Our standard team policy has been a one-week suspension. He also has some athletic department protocol he'll go through. I'm anticipating he'll handle that well. He practiced on the scout team yesterday. He'll do that all week.

As far as I know, unless something unforeseen happened or come up, that would be the plan.

Q. And then my other question was, and I know you've been asked home field and visiting team, I hope you'll indulge me in one, the dynamic of maybe visiting teams being a little more comfortable this year and home teams maybe psychologically feeling awkward with the empty stadium, does that dynamic ring true with you having now been on the road and played at home?

KIRK FERENTZ: We said that last week, and I think I made the comment, I was a little more concerned about being at home than on the road to that point.

After being in both, I would concur with that. I think it's accurate. But all that being said, that's not what the game gets decided by. It can be a crutch if you want it to be a crutch. Hopefully nobody in our building is looking that way, and it's all about what we do on the field, it really is. It's about our production on the field and how we play, the energy we have.

It's just smart to know going into it but it is going to be what it is, pretty quiet, and just like, you know, if we were going into a hostile environment, you obviously want to be prepared for that. This year that won't be as big a factor and hopefully it's the last year we ever have to talk about that.

Q. What have you seen -- I know you didn't get practice today, but you've commented in the past when you've got good guys on the team, do you feel confident that you will not lose this team, so to speak?

KIRK FERENTZ: You must know something I don't, but our guys are great. They were good on Sunday looking at the film. A lot of good things on that film. There are a lot of things that were painful. You know, it's like every game. But when you don't win, it's a little harder. That makes it a harder day. But they were great on the field yesterday morning. Thought we had a good workout. Got a lot done, a lot accomplished. Good meetings last night.

I have no reason to think that they are not just going to keep pushing forward. I have no reason to believe that. I think we have good players. I think we have good people as I've said. Haven't seen anything to the contrary, and obviously coaches have little things they look at all the time and watch. I'm seeing a lot more good than negatives, that's for sure.

Q. When you see what's going on with Wisconsin and Clemson's quarterback and so many things like this and is when you come out of the

tunnel at Kinnick and nobody is in the stands, does the whole thing feel off, or are you so tunnel-visioned with football you don't even think about it?

KIRK FERENTZ: When we come out of the tunnel, it's a strange feeling. Different, certainly. You'd have to be oblivious, totally oblivious. I'm not that focused not to know that.

On the COVID thing, I think that's probably the biggest thing. I actually saw an interesting article about voter stress in the last couple days. I'm trying to figure out what that means. But maybe I can equate it to COVID stress, because there's definitely -- it's taken on a whole new element. We test daily, as you know, in the Big Ten and yeah, when my phone, the little ding it makes when you get a text message from the trainer, I don't look forward to those because you just don't know what is going to be on there.

I think certainly you look across the straight border here and it's a good reminder, constant reminder that this thing is just day-to-day right now. I think we have all known that really since March if not sooner. It's very real. It's apparently not going away. I've told our team, just figure it's going to be this way until January. You take it day-by-day. Don't assume anything. You know, just hope for the best. Try to be as smart as you can but you know, there's nothing you can do to be 100 percent insulated from this thing, I don't think. We all have to keep living but we have to try to be smart.

It's a concern, certainly, knowing that something could happen at any time. Just look at any of the pro teams that are playing in the pro leagues, and then certainly in college football, it's very real, too. There is just nothing about this year that's going to be normal, that's for sure.

Q. Thinking back to last season, in what ways have you seen Daviyon Nixon improve, and how have you seen him emerge as one of your vocal leaders off the defensive side of the ball?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think football at any level is all about growth and it's all about development. You know, every now and then, guys come in here and play right off the bat. That doesn't happen a lot. It's really uncommon.

Last year in Daviyon's case, we had two guys that were seniors, both with Reiff and Lattimore in there. I don't know if you remember last year, I commented on how well they had done that spring prior to their senior year, and I was concerned about the consistency level of both those guys and they had great springs, not good springs.

Going into the season, we felt like we had two starters that we were really comfortable with and knew were going to do a good job and Daviyon was coming up the ranks. He got to play a lot last year. He certainly has grown and practiced really well and he's played really well in two games. He clearly has worked his way into a starting role where he's impacting our defense in a positive way.

It's the same thing off the field, so it's just good to see. If we're going to be a good team, we need those kinds of stories on both sides of the ball, and on special teams, as well. That's just how teams come together and they grow.

Q. You've been through the league 20 years worth here, it used to be an 11-team league where you played Wisconsin and Minnesota every year, and everybody else six times over eight years, and then you didn't play Illinois for several years, and Wisconsin a few years, and with Michigan State, you had really a tremendous rivalry, I would say, year-in and year-out when you're part of the legends division. What is it like to be in this league where some years you're playing teams every year and others you're not, and what's your thoughts about the Spartans Hawkeyes rivalry over the years?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, to your point, that thing went all the way back to when I was here as an assistant in the '80s. We had some great games through the years, so it's one of those traditions.

I'm sure it's not unique to our conference. In college football, one of the biggest, most impactful things that has happened since the '80s or '90s is expansion. It really has taken place in this century. You know, the big expansion, Penn State joined the league in the early '90s, but when things started shaking that way, not only in our conference but across the country, that's when things, a lot of the norms or things you were used to in the year-in, year-out rivalries went out the window.

The Illinois series would be the one that really impacted me because I think that whatever year we picked them up, we had not played them since 2008, 2009 or something like that. It's kind of strange for a school that close to us.

I think it's reflective of what's going on in college football and it's a reality of the whole thing. So the whole series has taken on much different light, but all that being said it gets down to being a conference game that's extremely important this Saturday.

Q. Couple position questions. Who takes Ihmir's 52 snaps that he played the other day at Northwestern? Who steps up there? And also, you've still got Coy Cronk at right tackle, is that accurate on the first team or did Kallenberger unseat him on Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: At the receiver position, obviously Ihmir is not going to play. Tyrone Tracy is going to get more reps out of that, and Charlie Jones, and we'll go from there. Those two guys are next in line for the most work, certainly.

With the line position, we're hoping to start the same group we started last week. We'll just see how the week goes. One good thing is right now I think we probably have seven, eight guys who we are pretty comfortable playing. That's what we've been doing and we'll just -- no matter who starts a game, I would assume we'll keep rotating players through there and giving them all work because they have earned that right right now.

Q. I wanted to ask about Spencer and how he's handled things after two games. Tough spot for a young quarterback to come in and start 0-2. How has he responded this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you know, I'll add to that I said back somewhere in the summer, one thought I had based on the pandemic and just the situation, it would be good this year to be well-endowed genetically. You know, a team that's got genetics for experience is a good thing and that's certainly an experienced quarterback.

We don't have an experienced quarterback. That is one thing that's a little bit different I've referenced. We've had a lot of first-year quarterbacks have a lot of success. Those guys all had spring ball and a normal camp going into the season, and they had the month of September to kind of build up to Big Ten play but that's not the case.

So we are right in league play. Spring ball, nobody had it, or at least not many people had. I shouldn't say nobody.

So those are things he's working through but I think he's doing a really good job. He had a couple tough series this past game in the second half. But I'm thinking back to 2009 when James Vandenberg, coming in against Northwestern for Ricky, and a week later went to Ohio State gave us every chance to win that football game and played his tail off.

So that's week-to-week. He's a young guy. He's quality. We all believe in him, and he's done a lot of good things already and I think all of us are really confident he's just going to keep getting better as we go, and we are looking forward to seeing him play this Saturday.

Q. Curious about on your depth chart, Nick DeJong was listed as the No. 2 right tackle. I know he was a walk-on, but pretty good athlete in high school. What has helped him vault into that territory and how do things set with him and, say, Mark Kallenberger on the depth chart?

KIRK FERENTZ: Mark is our next tackle in, for the record there. We've got Nick. We've got Jack Plumb. Those would be our five guys that are playing tackle right now.

We think Nick is a good prospect. I kind of half-smiled when you were talking about him because I think he was quarantined like 45 days this summer, something like that, and he needed to be training. But instead, he was -- I don't know what they do on quarantine, play video games or watch movies, Netflix, whatever, so it was unfortunate for him.

He's done a really good job. He's kind of quietly done some good things in practice over the last two years here. We are very impressed with him. I think he's got a chance to become a good player here. I'm not sure he knows how much potential he has at this point, but hopefully he'll keep pushing forward, and that goes back to the pandemic thing. These quarantines were just killers. I mean, first of all, if a guy

is sick, you worry about them and fortunately we haven't really had anybody that's had any complications, nothing really major at all.

But the quarantines, when guys just had to sit idle for two weeks, that just was hard and Nick unfortunately. Made his training hard. It's made the challenge a little bit tougher for him but he's doing a good job. Great to have him back on the field, whether it's been four, five weeks and just doing really, really well. We're excited about him and we'll just see how things go.

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