

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Appreciate you guys all being here. Yeah, before we get to Northwestern, I'll talk a little bit about the last game. Going into the game we knew that Purdue was a very explosive offensive football team and presented some challenges. They had a veteran quarterback, some really talented skill players.

Bottom line is both teams really played hard. They made a few more plays than we did, and they came out on top, but it was a really good football game.

We go back, look at the tape every week, and focus on the things that we think are correctable, and that's really where our focus has been this week thus far. We've had two days now.

Every game has elements that are out of your control, and the big thing there is you don't focus on those, let those become distractions or use them as excuses. Bottom line is we've got to play better and find a way to do so.

That's where it's at right now. Nobody in our camp is pleased with the outcome certainly, and that being said, as I said the other night, really proud of our football team. They've worked hard. They've played hard and competed hard nine games, and the task now is try to continue that, find a way to come out on top in our next challenge.

Turning to Northwestern, first of all, it's great to be back home. We've had a quirky schedule this year, heavy at the front end with home games and then four out of five on the road. To get back in Kinnick and be back in Kinnick for two out of the last three is certainly a positive, but to be back there Saturday, we're looking forward to that opportunity.

This game has really become a big rivalry between us and Northwestern going back 20 years. We've had a great series over the years, and it's not a trophy game officially but really kind of feels like that. They're an outstanding football team. When you look at them on tape, I think one thing is very apparent. They've got an identity, a clear identity. I think that's got to do with the longevity of Coach Fitzgerald there and their staff. They're very well-coached. They know who they are, what they are, and the commonalities, their guys play

hard and they're productive, very good football players.

I think beyond that, the thing that jumps out at you, they're really good at reacting to situations. Whatever comes up, they seem to be prepared for that.

We're going to have to compete at a really high level to stay with these guys. That's for sure.

For the third street week we're facing a team that's has an experienced quarterback who is a good football player. Certainly, Clayton Thorson is a little different type player than the last two we faced, but nevertheless very productive, a great leader, and has led them to the top of the West right now, the Big Ten West. I think that's a real credit to them and his leadership.

The biggest thing for us to move forward right now is moving forward, and that takes mental toughness. We can't be looking back or worried about the what-ifs. We have to do what we can to get ready for this ballgame and do our best to prepare. We got two days under our belts, and so far, so good. Happy about that. Need to finish the week out right now, and I think all of us are looking forward to getting out and having another opportunity to compete this week against a really top-notch opponent.

On the injury front, I mentioned Shaun Beyer last week suffered an injury, a non-contact injury, so he's going to miss the next couple games. I don't know if we'll get him back for the bowl game or not. We'll just wait and see on that.

Our captains this week are the same four guys as last week: Parker Hesse, Jake Gervase defensively, and Nate Stanley and Keegan Render.

And then just a quick sidebar -- Quinn Early is here, back in the state now for a couple days, and has been part of a book. He and his mom wrote a book together. I have not read the book, but I've read the account of what it's all about, his mom's battle with Alzheimer's. Just want to commend Quinn for being part of that and what he's doing. It's a charitable cause and I'm sure it's something near and dear to his heart. Quinn obviously was a football player here. I got to overlap with him back in the '80s, but beyond that he's just a top-notch human being and a great representative of

what college football is all about and certainly what the University of Iowa is all about, so it's great to have Quinn back here.

Q. How much do you feel like people publicly don't think Northwestern is Northwestern from the '70s and '80s and don't realize how good this program has been under Fitzgerald?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'd say they're living in the past if there are people like that. I don't know. I think people that follow college football closely probably wouldn't be of that opinion. But neither one of us were very good quite frankly in 1999. I think they might have notched us out record-wise. I know they did in the Big Ten. We didn't win a game. I think might have won one against us on a two-point play.

But you know, that's the past. They really had a resurgence in the '90s, had some great football teams, which Pat played on and captained, was an outstanding player on them, and then dipped a little bit, but really found their identity I think in 2000 when they converted a little bit to where they're closer to what they are now offensively.

I think the other real significant point, from my vantage point at least, is they've really developed a defensive identity 2007, 2008, and to me since that time they've been a really tough opponent and have played very well. And you can just go back and look, a 10-win team last year, I think nine the year before that, or 7-9, whatever it is, but they've won a lot of football games.

But bottom line is when you put the film on, they're extremely well-coached. Those guys play hard, and they play good football. If anybody is in that mode, that was in the '80s. I was here then, and that's a long time ago. I can tell you that. A lot of things have happened since then.

Q. You were pretty preoccupied in 1995 with a pretty crazy situation --

KIRK FERENTZ: Somebody told me today it was this day in history, right? Yeah, this is the anniversary apparently when it got announced. How about that?

Q. Did you even -- were you even paying attention at all to see what Northwestern had done --

KIRK FERENTZ: The only two teams I followed, three teams I followed when I was in the NFL, obviously Iowa and then Kansas State and Wisconsin, and then the only thing I would say is I'd see them on tape evaluating players, and made a visit there when Gary Barnett was coaching. I can't tell you who it was that worked out, but I was there for a workout, but watching the tape, they clearly -- Tom Broughton was their line coach, doing a great job. I remember that. They had a

really good staff, and they had a really good football team. They were playing good defense, much like they are now. They're playing really good defense. Their offensive style was different, but they were playing good football, as good as anybody in the conference obviously, and went to the Rose Bowl.

Q. When you've had teams finish strong like down the stretch, what have been common characteristics of those versus maybe like 2010, 2014 that maybe faded down the stretch?

KIRK FERENTZ: There's no magic formula. It's like winning any game. It starts with your preparation during the week. Then you've got to go out and compete. But I think when you shift into November really, it deals with -- that's the one thing about football just in general. Circumstances change so much. I'm not following the NFL very closely right now, flip it around, but you kind of just hear these themes, and I know back in September it looked like Jacksonville was playing well and Houston was on their way down the skids. Now it's just flip-flopped as I understand it.

In college football there's a lot of examples of that, also. The bottom line is circumstances are always changing. You could be on a real good streak where you're winning, or you could be coming off two tough losses, last-possession losses.

What it gets down to, the circumstances are a little different that way, in the mental games that can get played. It really gets down to your ability to focus on what's important. It's like playing a game; when it's game time, the only thing that counts is that game. Right now I think the teams that can focus on their preparation and keep their eyes there and then go out and compete on Saturday are the ones that give themselves a chance.

Obviously injuries factor in there, obviously some other circumstances can factor in, but those are things you know are going to happen in August. You don't know how they're going to surface or what the challenges are going to be, so how do you deal with those things.

Q. How important is veteran leadership in moments like this?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's always important. It doesn't have to be veteran, but it sure helps when you have veteran guys that are really committed. If they're focused, chances are the other guys might come with them at least, and then if you have veterans and encourage guys to come with them, that helps, too, and I think we have that.

That's one thing about this team. We necessarily didn't have that in the spring, but it's emerged, and we have a

really good group of guys that are committed, and they're showing other guys and telling other guys what we need to be doing.

Today was the first chilly practice we've had, for instance, so for the older guys, it's not a big deal, but for some of the younger guys, it's a good chance for them to get acclimatized and just get used to being out there, if it's a little bit breezy or a little bit chilly, that kind of stuff, but the older guys are helping them with that, too. Come on, let's go.

Q. I'm sure every coach every week sends something to the Big Ten and says, hey, look at this. I'm sure the motivation is to look for what you saw the last game. Does that ever work?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, yeah, I think we probably all do it, to your point, and if nothing else, there might be clips on there that they put on their training reels because I know they do that and circulate those. I don't know if it's weekly but maybe monthly. I'm not sure how they do it. If there's something we think that's worth them looking at for teachable moments, that type of deal, I think that's good, and that's part of the process.

A lot of times we'll get responses, good, bad or indifferent. Our way of looking at things might be totally different than what someone else sees. It's educational for us, as well.

Q. Why is it that defensive backs, specifically cornerbacks, are ready to play earlier in their careers versus say safeties or other players? I know farther away from the ball, you always say they're more ready to play, but the cornerbacks seem -- you've had great success with guys like Desmond King going right on -- and Julius and now Riley. What makes them readier to play earlier versus some of the other positions?

KIRK FERENTZ: A couple thoughts there. Cornerbacks or light tackles, offensive tackles. Those guys don't have to think as much as a quarterback or a free safety because those guys are in the hub of things, kind of the signal callers. So they're reacting more to calls that are being made, if you can put it that way.

They're also very similar, I think, in terms of they're both really challenging, difficult positions to play. It's really tough to play either one of those spots, and you'd better have a short memory if you do play them because you're going to have some bad plays, too.

But the big difference between them is the physical part of it. You know, there aren't many fifth-year receivers banging up on corners, that type of thing. It's more of a different kind of competition out there,

whereas a fifth-year guy against a first-year guy, defensive end versus tackle might be a whole different story.

But you know, the bottom line is the guys you mentioned, you go back, guys like Micah Hyde played early in his career, Desmond, right on through. So part of that's what's in our inventory and also part of it is who's most ready to play, and sometimes those guys just surface. That's the way it's worked out. It's still an education, but it's an education when you're a senior, too. You're still out there learning every play if you're doing it right.

Q. Matt Hankins, has he kind of reacclimated?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's back with us and good graces, and yeah, he is healthy finally. Last week he kind of turned the corner that way, so he's back practicing right now. We'll see what happens.

Q. Do you plan to use him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely.

Q. You're not going to redshirt him?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, we're playing him. I don't know if he'll start this week, but he practiced today, practiced well, and hopefully he can make it to Saturday, and I'm not saying he'll start, but my guess is he'll play.

Q. Do you know what you're going to do -- do you know who your two starters are at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not yet. It's only Tuesday, so we'll let the week pan out and see where we're going to go.

Q. Is Brady Ross healthy?

KIRK FERENTZ: Brady is not. I didn't mention him, but no. I'm guessing maybe next week, but I doubt it, so we're probably looking at another week. It's one of those ankles, and those are bad.

Q. When you go back to when you were recruiting T.J. Hockenson, what made you pull the trigger and give him that offer?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really when he came to camp. It's not the same as Ike Boettger but kind of like Boettger and A.J. Parker Hesse we didn't pull the trigger after camp, but we were sure intrigued with him, and when you get a live exposure to some players, that helps, and in Parker's case we wanted to see him play live. Riley Moss was the same way.

But T.J. came to camp, and we really didn't see him get involved in much contact quite frankly. He was playing more receiver and playing way back on defense. So when we saw him actually get out on the field and compete a little bit, that really kind of solidified our feelings with him, and everything else about him really

checked out. He's a tremendous young man, first and foremost, and all those kinds of things. He's doing a lot of things in different sports, so that's always encouraging, too.

Q. You had Tracy out there the other day. Are you kind of thinking four games with him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely, yeah. He'll probably use the four, yeah. I think he's not in the Army yet, fully enlisted, but he's got a foot in the water for sure.

Q. You wouldn't plan on -- he's not at the point where you'd plan on crossing into five?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't think so. We'll see what happens, but I don't think so.

Q. The freshman playing four games, has that changed evaluations of them, and is that the type of thing that opens doors more than it would have?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think so, yeah. I think it's been a good thing. Again, I would expand it and just make everybody eligible. But yeah, this is better than nothing certainly, and we've been able to use some guys on some special teams. A couple weeks ago we were really thin, so Dillon Doyle was in the water there swimming a little bit, and now we've pulled him out, and I think we'll be able to protect him as long as we don't have any more issues at that position.

That part has really been good, and now it gets a little tricky in Tyrone's case because we've used up two, we've got two left. But we're playing for today, so that's our first thing is we'll play for today and then we'll make the decision when we get there if we have to.

Q. Did you get the impression this summer that Riley and Julius were going to be in the mix and maybe start a lot of games?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, no. I mean, just -- what we saw and evaluated early in the camp was that these guys were really competing well, and we don't usually have very many preconceived ideas about people. We try to let things unfold in front of us and see what they do once they start practice.

You know, you have perceptions of people certainly from recruiting and going through the summer program, but until they really start playing football, and Yanda is the greatest example, right; I thought we really blew it when I saw him in our winter program, and two days in shorts, was okay, but then when he started blocking, like that's what he does best, which fortunately for us that's what we want him to do.

So the same thing with those two guys. They've really handled camp pretty well, competed well, did some things -- it wasn't perfect, but they did some things that

showed up and kind of gave us the encouragement maybe to keep working with these guys and see where they go.

Q. Going to be an open competition again in a year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, yeah, absolutely. The thing about our corner position, I don't know how many games Matt started coming into this year, one or two. So it was hardly like he was a veteran, OJ wasn't a veteran so we had no veteran. All the focus was on the linebackers, but really it was linebackers plus corners. We had five spots we had no experience at coming in.

Q. What did you think when you first heard Northwestern was going to spend a quarter of a billion dollars on an athletics facility?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, it's college athletics right now. That's the world we're living in. It's funny, I was just down there putting a tie on and talking to one of our strength guys who spent some time at Florida State, and they really haven't done that, and I can remember going back out to USC in 1989 and watching John Matz go meet with his offensive linemen in a room like this. They had folding chairs, they had a TV like you'd have at home and a VCR, and I'm looking around there's like 10 Heisman Trophies in the same room, Heritage Hall, and they're sitting on these chairs, and I'm like, wow, I'm at USC. It was hard to believe. But kids were going there because it was USC, and even they have obviously changed.

It's just the world we're living in right now. I think everybody has made a concerted effort to upgrade facilities, and if you're going to be a team that's going to compete, unless you've got mountains or oceans, I'm not sure that works anymore. It used to, but I think everybody right now has gone that direction.

Q. Given what Northwestern has done under Fitzgerald and before, their stadium is substandard by Big Ten standards, their facilities have been substandard by Big Ten standards, and yet they've built a good program. How have they done that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I think they're a unique program, first of all, relative to the Big Ten. They're the only private school in the conference, so that sets them in a separate category. The bottom line is I think they play really well, and you compare it to Duke maybe in the ACC, you compare it to Stanford, schools that are private and the conference is predominantly public institutions. I think the common denominator is they're really well-coached and they play well in the system that they've adopted. To me that's what you're seeing at Northwestern. They're doing a really fine job.

Q. You coached the first ten years here with

basically a tennis court being your indoor facility.

Do you find it against your nature -- does it go against your nature, these big Taj Majals that --

KIRK FERENTZ: Our climate, indoor facilities make a lot of sense, and Coach Fry brought that up, whatever year it was, '93 or '94. It makes a lot of sense just because of our weather conditions. The game has changed so much since the '80s, too, the time commitment, all those kinds of things, so it's a whole different world than it used to be. I think it was a great world back then. I think it's still a great world right now, and it's just -- I do think it's relevant now.

I don't feel like we needed a water park or a putting green in this building. I didn't really think that was pertinent to the mission we have, and I think if you look, just walk down that hall and compare our player lounge to our strength and conditioning area, there's a big difference, and quite frankly I don't care if any of our guys make all-Big Ten ping-pong or shuffleboard games. It really doesn't -- it's not on our list of objectives.

I think what we did here is reflective of what we think is important.

Q. When you look at Northwestern offensively statistically there's not much there, but then you look at success, and that's the most important thing, 5-1. What about them has kept them in the Big Ten race?

KIRK FERENTZ: You just answered the question right there. Really the most important stat is wins and losses, first and foremost, and the next -- to me are points scored and points allowed. If you look at statistically they're not going to be in the top 10. We weren't in '04, either, in a lot of categories, but you find a way to win, and that's what good teams do, and that's what they've done. Basically to me they went through a tough period of growth and trying to find their -- get their footing, and then they had their bye week, and since then they've been a really tough team to beat.

When they have been beaten, they were beaten by three points and beaten, whatever it was last week, 10 points, I guess, by two teams that are going to be on that show tonight, that fascinating show that comes on at 9:30 or whatever. But both of those teams will be on that show. These guys are gritty, they're tough, and they play good football, and they get back to situations. They find a way to win when it's important. They do what you have to do to win, and that's a big challenge in anything you do.

Q. Quite a few games this year where the run game, below four yards per carry, but you guys are still putting up a lot of points. Is this slowly

moving to a pass-first offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know about that. It ties into what we were just talking about. Statistics are statistics, and they're important to a degree, but you do what you have to do to move the football and score. For whatever reason, we have people look at us like we're a run-first team, which is kind of funny. They did it in '04, too, and we couldn't run from here to that door right there. If you gave us a whole game to do it we couldn't do it, but people were still coming down and playing us like -- they didn't think we could throw, either. But I think our goal is just to move the ball and try to score points, and we'll do whatever we feel we have to do to be successful at that.

Q. Alternate jersey is sounding like it's not happening this year; how much time do you spend thinking --

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll have to walk down the hall and check on that. Right now I'm really a little bit more focused on some other things like us playing good football. But yeah, part of it was like we didn't give them a three-year notice. You've got to give Nike three years to get something. I didn't understand it. I'm not really that concerned or maybe I'd look into it harder. But we'll do our best for next year, but we're going to try to win the next three games. That's what I'm more focused on now. I hope our players are, too.

Q. I know you talked a little bit Saturday about your players talking to officials. Talk about you and your coaches -- how do you not lose it? How do you?

KIRK FERENTZ: It can be a challenge, and I learned a lesson. We played -- it doesn't matter where we played, but it was in 1994, we got totally absorbed in the officiating and the game didn't end -- it probably cost us the game. We lost five games. We were 7-5, and one of the losses was because we just got so absorbed in what we perceived to be the officiating.

Lesson learned there. When the players start getting worried about it or the assistant coaches get worried about it, that's not a good thing. That's really my job. I'll handle that and hopefully I can compartmentalize it, and the reality is you're not always going to agree with what's being called or not being called. That's the way it goes. I think all of our hopes are typically -- I don't want to speak for other coaches. My hopes would be there there's consistency and good judgment, discretion. That's a big part of law enforcement, too, consistency and discretion.

Time-of-the-game situations, those kinds of things I think should factor into it. It's like baseball, if an umpire calls them high for strikes, you'd better adjust your strike zone if you're a batter, but if they're high and then they're not high or low and not low, that really gets hard

to follow the bouncing ball. It's hard to be a good hitter if that strike zone is not real consistent. That's what I think all of us hope for, and we all have different ways of looking at things.

Q. Did you talk to the Big Ten after Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: We typically converse. We converse. We're moving on.

Q. Northwestern brands itself as Chicago's Big Ten team, yet Chicago is a pretty big city, and it's closer to Iowa City than Sioux City is. As far as recruiting goes, it goes without saying it's really important. How often do you guys run into each other because I know their quarterback was a player that --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we really -- he's a first-class person, great family and really good player. So yeah, we go head-to-head I don't know how frequently, but we go head-to-head. We've got a lot of respect for them. They sell what they sell, and we sell what we sell, and it's kind of like with recruits. You just hope a recruit will look at your school and look at it and evaluate all the right things and things that are going to really impact his career and then make a decision. They're not all going to come your way, but if they're looking at the right things and then decide to go somewhere else, and I think that's kind of what happened in this case -- I mean, everybody walks away just -- you shake hands and hey, wish you all the best, and that's all you can hope for.

But I think when it comes to recruiting, you just hope the other schools are selling what they have and not talking bad about you, and that's not how it works with Northwestern -- that is how it works with them. They do things the right way. They sell their program, and they've got a lot to sell. It's a good school.

Q. For generations until about the last six or seven years you were the least populated state. Unlike most of your neighbors you're the only one that has another public institution within your borders. How does it feel to kind of have to -- you've been doing this for 30 plus years, going to other states, you're almost like Big Ten vagabonds that you have to pick and choose outside of the borders?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really been that way at least since 1980 or '81 when I got here. Chuck Long was a guy that nobody recruited and Ronnie Harmon kind of the same way. Supposedly Penn State wanted to make him a DB, and he didn't want to hear that, so that was good for us.

That's kind of the history of the program. You just -- you hunt and peck, and what have you, and there is another degree of difficulty when you have another

Power Five school within your state bounds. That makes it a little bit tougher.

But the ground rules haven't changed, and it's doable. You've just got to keep working at it.

Q. Does Mends have any chance to come back?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not in the regular season. Hopefully for the bowl, but it's just been a long road, and it's been a little frustrating for him quite frankly. All these injuries, you know, you just feel for the players involved because that's not what anybody wants.

Q. I asked your players if they were voting today, and the overwhelming majority said they were. Is it something you encourage or do you leave it to them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, absolutely. We had the Rise To Vote group come in. They came in a couple weeks ago for the entire department. They actually were here in May, I guess, post-spring ball. A friend of mine, Scott Pioli from the Falcons recommended we invite them, and they came in and did a great presentation last spring. Certainly we encourage that, and I think in this day of public discourse and all that, it's great to have opinions, but it's more important I think to take some ownership and go out and -- it's one of our liberties that we take for granted probably too often. We certainly have encouraged our guys, and hopefully they'll all do it. Hopefully the coaches will do it. We'll encourage that, as well, and let the best man win, or woman win.