

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, November 20, 2018

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. First, just want to start out by congratulating AJ Epenesa for being co-Big Ten Player of the Week on defense last week, and both our tight ends, Noah and T.J., for the recognition at the Mackey Award, and then T.J. moving up to the finals category. I'm happy for all those guys certainly.

The win in Champaign was really important for us, and the bottom line is we played well in all three phases and we were opportunistic, so those are always good things, and those are going to be really important traits this week, as well, as we face Nebraska, a very good football team.

Our captains this week will be the same four guys, we've got Parker Hesse, Jake Gervase, Nate Stanley, and Keegan Render.

Injury-wise not a lot to report right now. There's an outside chance we'll get Brady Ross back. That probably won't make headline news, but it will be great to get him back for at least some limited work if that's possible at all. But the rest of the guys got a couple nicks coming out of the game, and hopefully they'll all have a chance to make it by Friday. We should know here in the next day or two, see what that looks like.

Friday is Senior Day for 14 tremendous young people, and it's a smaller senior class, but each and every one of these guys have really brought a lot of good things to our football team. It's always interesting, every guy has got a different story. Some guys' careers go just as you hope. Other guys face injuries, face different challenges. It's a wide range every year, but the common denominator with all 14 of these players, they've all been great team members, they've all brought strong leadership to our football team, and especially when we're going through difficult times. That's when it really counts.

Just really happy for all of them. They've all supported our football team, and certainly they've all left their jerseys in a better place, and just we're thrilled to have them with us, and hopefully we can send them out on a really positive note. I know that would be a really special twist to an already important game for us.

This is a unique week. Certainly our guys are not in class, so that's a little different. It's a shorter week of

preparation, and they've got a few things they're getting caught up on, rest and academic work. But primarily our focus is on Nebraska. It's certainly true with our players, and I know it's true with the staff.

This game is extremely important to us. It's got a lot of weight, a lot of value, and we're giving it our utmost intention. Hopefully we'll have great preparation all week long. You look at Nebraska, they're a team that's really riding high right now, playing with really good momentum. Like any new staff, a team with a new staff, teams go through transitional periods, and you could see that early with their play. But if you look at the last half of the season, you're seeing the team really come together. They've jelled, and they're playing really good football right now.

If you look at them offensively, certainly the quarterback is a dynamic player, guy that's a game changer, does a lot of things that are very dangerous and makes him a very dangerous player. Got two outstanding backs, the main guy is a real tough strong runner and the other guy is extremely fast. Got a veteran offensive line, a lot of good size up there, and those guys do a good job, tight ends the same way, and then they've got very explosive receivers, and defensively they've been improving weekly, and certainly played their best game of the year last Saturday in a very impressive showing against Michigan State.

Again, it's a really short week. We've got to make sure our plan is concise, and the biggest thing is it's more about mental preparation than anything else right now at this time of year. That's always true in the latter third of the season. That's really what it gets down to is how well a team can prepare mentally and be ready to go.

That's our goal right now. We know we've got a tough challenge on Friday, but we're certainly looking forward to being back in Kinnick and being in front of our great fans. I'll throw it out to questions from there.

Q. What is it that makes Nebraska's offense go?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they threaten you in a lot of ways. It starts with the quarterback. He's not McSorley, but there are probably some parallels in there. He's really a very threatening guy, running the football, throwing the football. They've got designed

runs, designed options, those types of things, and then also he'll pull it down and go. You really have to respect that part of it, and he's done a good job throwing it. He's got good guys to throw it to.

That's a big part of it, and they'll take chances. They'll push the envelope. They'll go for it on 4th down, those types of things, and they just do a really good job of keeping pressure on you in all areas.

Q. Are they strong on the perimeter?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they're going to utilize the entire field, and that's run and pass or just kicking the ball out there. They've got good guys to kick it out to. They're really a really dynamic and a really diverse offensive attack. They run a million plays. That's the other part. Over the course of a season, we've got 11 games on them, they've got a lot of plays in their playbook.

Q. What you've done with Amani, do you see that as kind of a staple with the program going forward, to find that type of guy, or is Amani unique?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a little bit of both, but certainly Amani is a really good football player. I think where we line him up, he'll play good football. It'll be an off-season discussion. It's already been kind of kicked around. We look at recruiting needs and that type of deal. But I think it's just probably a sign of the times with the kinds of offenses that we're facing week in and week out, the majority of offenses now are playing with three or four wide, so it makes some sense you could make that argument, and then we have a couple teams in our conference that are the other way, too, where you couldn't line up that way I don't think down in and down out. But it's certainly something that will be part of our fabric, and I think the percentage of usage will probably be more expanded as we move forward. That would be my guess.

Q. How do you feel this rivalry has grown, and is it a game you enjoy playing, kind of an old-school Big Ten team like Nebraska?

KIRK FERENTZ: I like playing on Friday this time of year. I would not like it early in the season unless it's the first game. But I think when you're in the months of September and October, every minute is really extremely important.

At the end of the year, I think it makes sense. It's doable, because it's more of a mental thing at this point. And it makes perfect sense for us to play a neighboring state. For years we didn't play Illinois, which was kind of strange. But it was all a byproduct of the expansion. To me it made sense. It might have been a little forced at the front end. I know that was the feeling of some people, but it seemed like it's

settled in as kind of a natural match-up, and it's a shame it's not going to go on in the future, at least continually.

But that's the way that went, and it looks like it will at some point gain gravity again, a little traction, and hopefully it'll be in place for the rest of the way. It makes too much sense not to do it.

Q. What's been the secret to T.J. Hockenson's success, from redshirt to now talking Mackey Award in two years?

KIRK FERENTZ: There is no secret. It's like anything. Usually when things really happen that are good, good outcomes, and this story is not over yet, obviously, but it's usually a guy that has a good attitude. He's got a good skill set. T.J. obviously has that. But more importantly, he's just had a really good work ethic, and he's been patient, and he's worked day after day.

In our camp, we've felt like he was a pretty good player for quite some time now. But I know nobody wants to hear this, but players typically get better as they go along, if they've got a good attitude and they're working hard and they really take their experiences, good and bad, and he's had both, and learned from those, and then pushed forward. It's kind of like a team.

It's just part of the process. The good news is I think he'll continue to get better because he's playing really well right now, but he can play better, and he knows that. He'd probably be the first guy to tell you that. But that's exciting. I think you get excited if you're a player, you see yourself growing and you see yourself improving, it's a pretty neat thing. But there's really no secret to it other than he's got a good skill set, but most importantly he's putting it to use.

Q. How have your options been -- you guys have gotten a lot of explosive plays out of tight ends. Not a lot of people can do that. Is that the players or what you guys are trying to do?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we've always tried to utilize our tight ends, and then when you have guys that have some abilities -- T.J. is not your average bear by any stretch, and Noah, I've floated the term specialist out there. It sounds like that gained some traction.

But I guess my inference there was like, he runs like a specialist. There aren't many tight ends I've ever seen or been around, certainly, live that can run like he can. He almost effortless when he runs. So it puts him in a little different category in my mind as a tight end.

So he can take a 10- or 20-yard gain and he might go the distance with it, and he has done that, and T.J. has done the same thing. Dallas Clark had that ability, too,

that 5-yard pass against Purdue that year ends up being a huge play in the game.

But not every guy has the ability to do that. Some guys can make the play and make the catch and get turned and all that, but to finish a play like these guys do, both these guys have the capability of, that's a really unique thing.

Q. Is there any key to getting them loose like that for those big plays?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, sometimes man coverage helps a little bit sometimes. That helps. And because it is a tough match-up, whether you're a safety or a linebacker. And then corners are probably going to have a hard time size-wise. It's a nice thing to have a tight end that has that type of ability. Yeah, so it helps.

Q. Not to kill too many fun stereotypes, but you're the most explosive pass offense in the country on 3rd down with the most big plays and the most yardage. How did that happen?

KIRK FERENTZ: I didn't know that, quite frankly. I know we're doing well on 3rd down. I do know that, on more the percentage there. But again, it takes a good plan, but most importantly, it's the execution. To get a big play, either somebody has to blow a coverage or somebody has to work to get open, and then just like we're talking about, if you have a couple guys that can take the ball and do something with it afterwards, that helps a lot, too. I mentioned they've got a couple explosive receivers. Both those guys are -- any time the ball is in their hands, no matter how they get it, they can do the same thing. They can finish a play.

We're clearly further down the road now with our other positions, the other guys that are touching the ball. The receivers in particular are I think better than a year ago, and hopefully we can keep building on that, too.

Q. Looks like you're utilizing the middle of the field and trying to get the ball down the field a little bit more than in the past. Is that kind of a schematic change that's been made over the last few years?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, obviously you'd like to do that a little more, but you have to have the players to do it, too. You have to have guys that are going to get open and a quarterback that can get the ball there and do it on a somewhat consistent basis.

Perfect world, yeah, you'd love to do that, the old Al Davis, fire-it-down-the-field stuff, but the way defenses are playing dictates some of that, but it takes guys on your end, too, that can handle it.

Q. You've talked throughout the year about Keegan's leadership and he's been a captain pretty

much every week. How pivotal was it for him to kind of fully embrace the move to center, and what's he meant to this senior class?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we talked about T.J.'s progression and ascension, and really Keegan is probably the same way, it's just not near as visible of a story. But he's played well for us in years prior, too. Not that he wouldn't have gotten votes as a captain a year ago, but I doubt he would have gotten many. I know he didn't, but we had other guys. Let's just say some of those guys were off the board and he was in there. He was a good player on our team, but that's the biggest change I've seen in him from last year to this year is just his eagerness to accept that opportunity, and he's really done a great job.

He is kind of the hub of things with our offensive line, but I think it goes beyond that, too. There are a lot of players on our team that look at him as a guy that's respected. He's played hard, he's had his ups and downs, his trials and tribulations and disappointments, and then transitioned into a really important role this year as a center, and it all just kind of really, I think, has come together for him. But to me it's just the building of a career, a good career, and he's a tremendous young man on top of that. Does a good job in everything else, too. But he's really playing quality football for us right now, and that's really helped us.

Q. Another guy that's been a captain every week is Gervase. Obviously a walk-on when he came in. How much has he meant to the program, and also maybe the leadership aspect of the senior class?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I worry at times that we may get sued by some players on our team like we have a bias toward walk-ons at free safety. He just kind of fits that mold. Not to stereotype players, but we've had so many guys at that position that came here, we have good feelings about them coming out of high school, they may have been multipositional players in high school, that type of thing, a lot of times running back. I think about Considine. But for whatever reason they ended up here, and they first show up on special teams really doing a good job. Hey, that guy is doing a good job on special teams, but probably not fast enough ever to play for us at safety. Brett Greenwood, oh, geez, we've got somebody hurt, Illinois, '07, Greenwood is in there, we end up beating them, they go to the Rose Bowl and Greenwood plays the game, didn't seem to hurt us, and next thing you know he has a really good career.

That's kind of been Jake's story, too. He's just done a really good job as a special teams guy. When he got his opportunity a year ago to play safety, he played it really well, made some mistakes, and most of those guys do make mistakes at the front end, and then as it

gets going, they just really start playing. They've learned so much from playing out there and making some mistakes, and the guys that have really been successful have learned from what they didn't do well and transitioned that into knowing how to do things. And then beyond that, all the guys that I'm thinking about, at least on that list, have become really good captains and leaders, and Jake is on that.

We talked about Keegan. Jake is so highly respected by everybody, too, just because he works so hard. He's totally committed to it. He's just had a great career, so it's a good story.

Q. He gave you the game ball after Saturday I saw. Seemed like you were emotional. What does a moment like that mean to you?

KIRK FERENTZ: I want to find out who puts these guys up to that stuff. At least they don't carry me off the field. That's good. Somebody is putting them up to that.

Any time you win a game, any time good things happen, it really is all about you feel good for your players because they've been through some tough times. Those three games that we lost, that was a difficult period because there was a lot of what-ifs in there, every time you lose a game, this play, that play. To take your focus off that and put it forward, that's really the challenge, and it's a challenge in life, too, when you go through rough times. So can you do that.

And the reason it happens is because the guys in the front of the room are helping drive that, the older guys. Those guys that will walk out there before the game. They're really the impetus behind good things that happen.

You know, 150 is the number, but all the players that have been part of this, that's the story right there. That's the fun part about it all.

Q. You've had a lot of young players who have played well in the secondary. You had your true freshman corners out there, Riley and Julius, and then you also have Matt, who's not exactly old, either, and Ojemudia and D.J. Johnson has played and Kaevon Merriweather has played. What does that set the stage for for bowl prep because generally you guys take a second look at a lot of that. Are you going in with a fresh set of eyes at some of those positions?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, hopefully it'll be good competition, and better competition because they have been on the game field. Once you've been on the field, you have a little better feel for what it takes, the what the tempo is and just how hard it is, how challenging it

can be. I think we have a chance to have really healthy competition. We'll be able to rest some of the guys in early December that have been accumulating a lot of snaps and keep working the guys that haven't. Hopefully we'll be a stronger team here by the end of December. That's part of it. But yeah, it's a nice opportunity.

Q. Speaking of Gervase, he's such a veteran and knows what he's doing back there. Do you have an eye on maybe -- because there's so many good corners, of maybe one sliding over there working in there so maybe next spring he can --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we've definitely always been open to that, whether it's Hyde or King, those discussions. There's always some give-and-take on that, and I know Phil thinks Amani probably could go out and play corner pretty well right now, we just can't give him up inside or where he's playing.

But the more flexibility you have, certainly the better your team is going to be. It gives you a chance to get the best four guys out there for whatever situation it might be, or five now. We're playing five a lot of the time.

Q. Parker Hesse has been like a staple leader for that defensive line. Maybe he's underappreciated this season. How do you sum up his season and what he's meant to your program?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really representative of who he is and the kind of career he's had. First of all, he got thrown in there before he was ready, and that's hard. And he never complained about it, but I think about his last game, the championship game in Indy, he's playing against a first-round draft pick, and that was not an ideal match-up. You've got a guy who's a veteran who coincidentally was a walk-on at Michigan State, but he's playing well as I understand it in the pros. So here is fifth-year guy been through it all, and a young guy, Parker Hesse playing because Drew Ott was out, and still hasn't been ruled eligible for his fifth year, even though everybody else in the country has been.

You have that kind of -- he went from that mismatch to just like Jake and a lot of -- Keegan, those guys have just quietly worked hard, and he's played really good football for us. We don't have a stronger leader on our football team, not a more vocal leader but a stronger leader. Maybe some other guys are a little more vocal. But he really is the guy that everybody looks to, I think, on this football team right now, and he just plays so well wherever we put him.

To me it's really been, I think, A.J. would tell you this, it's been the perfect situation for A.J. where he hasn't had to go out there and maybe go through some of

those things that Parker went through. We've been able to pick his spots a little bit, and we're all seeing growth with him, which is exciting, because like some of the other guys we talked about he has a pretty good skill set. He's really starting to figure out the tempo now and really starting to play with a little bit more decisiveness and confidence. So when you have that going, it's fun to watch that stuff going on, and just think about this, too, think about how much he's learned from being next to Parker, sitting next to him in a room or rooming with him on the road, all those things that really are important things and the fun things about football.

It's just a really healthy situation, and we've got three really good ends right now, and Chauncey is gaining ground, too, which is fun to watch.

Q. You guys have sent a ton of defensive ends out of here. How would you rank this depth chart compared to some of the ones you've had in the past?

KIRK FERENTZ: I haven't looked that far down the road, but yeah, at least we know this, Parker is not going to be here. But those other guys have really grown, and then who else is going to be coming along, that's the other part of the equation. We'll know more about that in December. But it's good to see, and that is one stark contrast, in the '80s we had -- I know Bortz got drafted and I think George Kittle were the only two defensive linemen during my time here, George played defense in the pros for Miami and Mark obviously went on and ended up being a Pro Bowl offensive guard. So that is one thing that's a little bit different. We've probably got a lot more defensive backs playing in the NFL now than we did back then, too. We're a little bit better there.

You think about the guys that we have had, Matt was at the last home game, Matt Roth was down there and D-Rob. Clayborn always comes to mind probably first and foremost, and he's still playing and playing well.

We've had a lot of really good guys, good players Kampman. Yeah, it's a good list of guys, good list to be on.

Q. What makes Parker such a good leader because a lot of his teammates say from the moment he got here he started having that impact.

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll go back to when we recruited him. I don't know if you've heard me tell this story, but he wouldn't commit to us for however long it was, and I know Mark Farley is from Waukon, right, so my question was did he date Parker's mom? What was going on? But the whole reason was, it would have been this week four or five years ago, I guess, he

showed up the Monday after they played in the state championship with his family, committed. And I asked him, I said, if you don't mind me asking you, what was the delay.

He didn't want to take away from his high school team. They were trying to do something as a team, collectively, and he didn't want it to be a distraction, his story to be the news instead of the team. That's just how he's wired. He's been that way from day one here. He works extremely hard. He just -- nothing is ever negative out of his mouth. He's just all about the team, and demonstrates it, and he is extremely mentally tough. Just unbelievable that way. But doesn't talk about it. Like he just does stuff. That's what he does.

Players that are like that, they really get respected for who they are and how they walk as opposed to what they're talking about necessarily.

Q. You have a former player that's the defensive coordinator that probably knows you guys inside and out, and Brian has had conversations with him when he was on the other side of the country.

What's your relationship like with Erik Chinander?

KIRK FERENTZ: I didn't even think about that. He probably knows our playbook, right? He played offense. But those guys don't know the plays. Our guys don't. So it's not like 20 years later he would remember what they were. Yeah, Chins is a great guy. He was a great guy, and you talk about senior day, right, so we had a pretty good group that year in '02, and we had three walk-ons that really were unbelievable, Hoveland and Chins and then also Will Lack goes on to Harvard Medical School and just transitioned out to the University of Washington, he got recruited out there, he and his wife are out there practicing now. Guys that went on and had great pro careers, and then you've got guys like those three guys that have really distinguished themselves in their own right, too. Chins grew up in a football family. His dad is a coach. His one brother Brett, he escaped, he's an engineer for John Deere. He's living a normal life. But Chins got sucked in and has done a great job, and he's really paid his dues. I think he was volunteering up at UNI. I think that was his first tour of duty, and he's just done a great job. He's been rewarded, and he's a really good football coach and a good person.

Q. Did you get to know Scott at all when he was at UNI just briefly?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we'd see each other at clinics and stuff like that, and I've got great respect for him, obviously, as a person first and foremost, and then what his career was all about and now you look at what he's done as a coach, he's just had a phenomenal run. Same thing, he's earned it. He's worked hard. There

probably aren't a lot of guys who would be willing to leave pro football and take a job maybe at a, quote-unquote, lower level school. Most guys want to start on third base and move over to the batter's box. But he's paid his dues, and he's done a great, great job. Unless they could have gotten Dr. Osborn to come back and do it again, I don't know what would have made more sense to really embrace what Nebraska is all about.