

# University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, November 23, 2021

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

## Coach Kirk Ferentz

### Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Just to start out, congratulations to both Tyler Linderbaum and Phil Parker. Tyler is a first-class young guy, really good football player, and really happy for him. And Phil has done a great job here for 22 plus years now, so not surprised at all by that.

Just real briefly, it's a short week right now, so a couple words about Illinois. First and foremost, happy to get the win, our ninth. As I've said all along, winning isn't easy in college football, a lot of parity out there, and each week is an adventure. So happy about that.

Happy about the growth we continue to see in our football team. Certainly pleased about that.

A lot of good things out there the other day. Got off to a little bit of a slow start there certainly on defense, that first possession. Had the problem on the punt, and next thing you know the defense is in the hole but they did a great job getting off the field, only giving up a field goal, and then certainly Charlie and the entire kick return unit gave us a big spark with that touchdown to get us right back within three points. A real momentum swing there.

But overall our lines are growing on both sides of the football. Again, their response was good and we're making some plays at some critical times, so that's certainly good.

You know, 12-week season, our goals pretty much are running consistent all the way through the year. We're trying to win each and every game that we're in and most importantly try to show improvement, so we're doing that this past month. Happy about that. Good to see.

Shifting our eyes to Nebraska, our captains will be the same four guys. We'll have Tyler Linderbaum, Matt Hankins, Jack Koerner and Jack Campbell. Injury-wise Matt is definitely out and everybody else is kind of along the iffy spot right now. Koerner looked okay today; we'll see how long he can go. Terry Roberts is still iffy, and Mason Richmond has a chance. We'll see how he holds up throughout the week. But we'll kind of go from there.

When you look at Nebraska, we're looking at a real big challenge. You put the film on, we're not surprised. We play them every year, but they're a very talented football team. The talent matches their stats. They do an awful lot of good things offensively, defensively, special teams, as well. It's going to be a big challenge for us. They're playing hard, they're competing. Going on the road playing over there is never easy, and certainly playing for a trophy is a big deal for both teams, I'm sure. So that's a big deal, as well.

Certainly sorry to hear about the quarterback situation. You hate to see any player get injured at any time of the season. It's unfortunate. We certainly wish him well. It's kind of the reality of college football right now, too, this time of year. Players are out, players are nursing injuries and those types of things. It's certainly sad news because he's a really electrifying performer.

Our kid captain this week is Blake Bergdorf from Shenandoah. He was born with a kidney issue, ended up having a transplant at age two and experienced a serious infection, so he had to fight through an awful lot of things, but he's a 10 year old now. I'm told he's a real big sports fan, so we're certainly glad that he'll be wearing the black and gold, and he's out there in western Iowa. Hopefully he can stay strong because that's split territory, and we'll be thrilled to have him representing us this weekend.

**Q. Does this Nebraska team feel like their record is not indicative of how good they may be?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you start by looking at the stats, which we've been watching those all season long with everybody, and then you see the film more importantly. They've always had good players. It seems like each and every year they've got guys that are hard to defend and hard to block. I think that's certainly the case.

For whatever reason they just -- they've played so many close games. It's tough. We've been there. There's nothing fun about those. But yeah, you watch them on film, they do an awful lot of things well. They're extremely diverse offensively, a million things to prepare for, and element of the unknown now a little bit, but they're just -- they move the ball, they score points, and defensively I think they're much improved from four years ago.

**Q. How have you seen this offensive line progress as they've gotten a lot more experience this year?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's been slow, really slow, but I think this past month has been encouraging. It starts in practice, just walking off the practice field, and part of that's guys being able to practice with some consistency. That's where injuries really get you. They hurt you on game day certainly, but it's that development, especially with offensive linemen, defensive linemen, and it's really true in any position, but it really shows there.

I think it was showing on the field. I just think our guys are playing with a little bit more confidence now. I'm not saying we're the Monsters of the Midway by any stretch, but we're closer to where we need to be, I think, and it's encouraging because you're watching younger guys develop a little confidence in themselves, and rightfully so, and a guy like Kyler who's back in decent shape now so he can look like a football player again, and cohesively that helps us a little bit.

**Q. When you look back on Alex's tape from Saturday, how would you review him and has he been taking the ones this week?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think he did a good job. If we were playing tomorrow, he'd be our quarterback. He did a good job, and I'll just qualify it again, I think Spencer did a really good job, too, and Spencer is really practicing well, also. He's being a good teammate first and foremost but he's also ready to go in case something happens.

If there's a good thing that came out of this injury, it's at least now we've got two guys that have played in games, and that's encouraging. Focus right now is getting through this week.

**Q. I feel like I ask you this every year this week, but why do you feel like you've been so successful on these short preparations for Nebraska in particular?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, first thing that comes to mind for me would be our players just being willing to accept the challenge, that it is a challenge. It's a shorter, more condensed period of preparation. We try to be careful about what we ask them to do physically and mentally, but ultimately, they really focus their time and spend it wisely or they don't, and the one thing that helps a little bit is we're not in class, so at least they've got more time to themselves now.

Just try to -- I think they still have some time to -- you can't play football or study football all day long, at least they can't. So, we encourage them to really just kind of

condense things, do what they've got to do, and then everybody can relax on Saturday when that's our day off this week, so we'll all take a break there.

**Q. Do you have much film on Smothers, the quarterback that they'll probably use?**

KIRK FERENTZ: No, not really. I think they might have dug some up from junior high. Those guys are pretty creative back there. Spring game, I guess, and that type of thing. But it's not the same. But we have an idea of who he is and what he is, and he's fast, I know that.

**Q. Do you go back to HUDL videos --**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah. We've got some young guys back there that are pretty creative. I'm not sure what we get out of that, but I tease them about that stuff. I swear to God, probably junior high. If Reese was one of our young guys back there, he'd probably be in the junior high stuff and tell you what the nurse said and all that stuff, school nurse.

**Q. If Mason can go, is he moving back in at left tackle then, or are you going to rotate?**

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll probably rotate. Really pleased with -- I mentioned guys growing. I think Jack and Nick both have done -- probably played as well this past Saturday as they have since they've been here. Not that they're five-year guys, but that is important. Like they're both growing, and Mason was really, I thought, starting to hit stride there when he got hurt unfortunately.

We kind of went from do we have a tackle, maybe we have three guys now that can hold the fort a little bit, and that's encouraging.

**Q. Cooper DeJean is in the two deep; when he came in you guys --**

KIRK FERENTZ: One of the few we'll have to figure out right now, so yeah.

**Q. You kind of put him at safety, now he's listed at corner. Is he going to be at corner?**

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. We're thin right now with Matt being out for sure, and we're thin. We'll see what happens. But he's playing on special teams. He wants to play. He wants to compete. He's done a really good job. He's doing a good job on special teams, so full speed ahead with him.

**Q. He's already played four games now; is that kind of the track you talked about earlier in the year like T.J. Hockenson, now you just move him in, or is that where**

## Cooper is at?

KIRK FERENTZ: I've definitely changed my mindset. I think it's ultimately up to the player, though. The players get the top vote and their families, so if they're -- I go back I was just talking to somebody about that, whether it would have been 2000, 2001, I think it was 2000, where you had Hinkel, Greenway, Hodge - I'm leaving somebody out. Roth chose to play and then I'm leaving one other guy off, but four of them chose to sit out and be fifth-year seniors. Which is really -- that wouldn't happen today. So that's a difference two decades later.

I know we're playing for today as coaches, and I think the whole team is playing for today, and I think that's Cooper's attitude, too. I don't know how many snaps he'll play, but he's getting a lot of work in practice, so he's moving fast, too, and it's really fun to see him grow.

**Q. Tory Taylor told us a little while ago that he's definitely coming back. This may be something that you've known for quite some time and just taken for granted. Can you address that? I'm sure your feelings are obvious about it, but how do you feel about it?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I've joked about Tory, whatever that show is with Robin Williams, remember he came down from -- what was the name of the show? I'm dating myself. Okay, Mork & Mindy. He's kind of like that. He's just so -- naïve is not the right word because that has a negative connotation in this case, but he's so fresh. Like going to Purdue last year, it was his first football game and everything was kind of new to him. I think he's really enjoying the ride right now.

We talked over the break, the bye week, and that was kind of my sense that he's fixed on coming back one more time, and then that'll probably be it. He's just been not only a really good player on the team but just such a positive addition to our football team because he is -- he really appreciates each and every day. He's kind of like Mekhi Sargent in some ways where Mekhi wasn't recruited out of high school, Iowa Western, comes here and it's just like every day was a walk in the park for him. He just really enjoyed it. Tory has some of that same appreciation. There's a freshness to it that's really unique.

Even that NIL deal where he for whatever reason, I don't know why, he can't collect on NIL because I think he's not from America. I don't understand that rule either. We'll have a press conference next week on stuff I don't understand. But anyway, he handled that in stride and found a way to make that a positive, it didn't seem to affect him at all.

It's unique how much he's enjoying this experience and

thoroughly enjoys his teammates, and he's really good for his teammates.

**Q. Tory talked about how much he appreciates guys on the punt and special teams, the punt return, and how much these guys take pride in that at Iowa and he said at other schools you really don't get a lot of guys like that. How do you guys get these players to really buy into special teams?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we've always -- going back 20 plus years we've always tried to educate our players that everybody on the team is important. They wouldn't be here if we didn't think that. I've always encouraged our staff, remind them. If they don't want to coach a guy, then we shouldn't have him on the roster. We invited them, they're all here because we invited them and we should treat them that way.

So we try to give everybody a chance to be coached and show what they can do. Then right along with that, so whether you're on the scout team, which a lot of younger guys are, and we've got older guys. A guy like Henry Marchese who threw a huge block on the kick return the other day, during the week he's either running pass routes or playing defense against our offense or our defense.

Just a really unselfish guy, but I think the good guys understand everybody has a role, and special teams are huge, and boy, we saw that Saturday. It caused a little bit of the turmoil with that snap going through Tory's legs, but then flipped it right around and got us back in the game. We did some really good things on special teams.

I think our guys get it that everybody counts and everybody potentially could have a role to help us win.

**Q. There have been years in which Shudak and Taylor I think could have been finalists for their national awards, but there seem to be so many great kickers now in football, kickers and punters. Any explanation as to why?**

KIRK FERENTZ: No, other than the Australian influx really seems to have impacted things. I think it was a couple three years ago when I caught that it was probably -- maybe the Pinstripe Bowl year because I was watching the Outback Bowl and I think it was Dusty Dvoracek talking about it, and since then you just see more and more of it. More locally, I guess I'm not as aware nationally, but our conference this year you guys have seen it, the punters and kickers have been -- seems like every week somebody has a guy that can really do something well. Last week, both those guys were just exceptional. It's like, wow.

I don't know if the COVID thing has part to do with it, but I can't remember a year where we've had this many punters and kickers that were so strong week after week.

**Q. You probably know this, but this team has a chance to become your fourth team with 10 regular season wins. Have you talked to them about that, and what does that say about this team that they're on the cusp of something like that?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, early in the week on Sunday basically we hear where we're at now, one of those deals, and then that's it. But certainly pointed it out to them, absolutely, because it's significant. If you can win 10 games at any time, I think it's been done nine times I think in the history of this program. 10 games is pretty significant, so if we could get to that and it would be better now in the regular season certainly, sooner the better, but it's like a couple weeks ago you can't get to ten without getting to seven or six or whatever so it's kind of a week at a time. We always give them the big picture and get right back to what's on tap here for this week.

**Q. After those two tough losses, especially the one against Wisconsin because it came off a bye, your team got off the mat and went and won a tough game at Northwestern and then won two since then. How were you able to do it, and seems like you do things like this all the time, but it's not easy, so how are you able to do it?**

KIRK FERENTZ: My answer would be just kind of like Saturdays, it gets down to players and having the right guys. I don't know that our message is anything special necessarily. Probably be like anybody else's that went through a loss or whatever. But really gets down to the players and the amount of pride they've got and their resiliency, and then I'd go back to Andre Tippett talking to the team a week ago Friday just saying, grit and resiliency, talking about the '81 ball club.

Good teams, that's what they have; they've got to have that because this is tough racket what we do. The other part goes right along with that is leadership. I know that '81 team had good leadership. It really stood out to me being the new guy walking in here. It was really clear to me that the older guys were tired of losing and they were going to do something about it.

I think I alluded to this a couple weeks ago, that we had the two-game losing streak that year and then went out in November and -- but it takes the right players. Coaches don't do that, that's players.

**Q. Alex is a neuroscience major; do you see that**

**translating to how he reads the offense?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. Sometimes those guys are kind of scary, the guys that are too smart. But that quarterback room has kind of been like that. Nate was back this past weekend, Stanley, and Drew Tate was a little departure to that 20, 18 years ago, but a little bit of a different character. But that room has been pretty cerebral throughout, so yeah, none of these guys surprise me. They're pretty good students and very serious about it. That's really a credit to them because they work extremely hard. They put more prep work in, and I'm sure that's true in every program. Quarterbacks just have so much on their plate to be ready for a game, plus carry the academic load they do, so it's impressive.

**Q. How important is it to have that considering the pro-style offense where the quarterback has a lot on their plate?**

KIRK FERENTZ: It helps, but I would also say -- I've been around football players not just quarterbacks where it's not -- my experience early in my career, test scores, majors don't always translate to football knowledge or common sense, football common sense, not just general.

Some players have that better, sometimes it's a guy that -- like we mentioned Drew grew up around football, his stepdad, and I'm not suggesting Drew is not a good student. I'm not suggesting that at all. I'll let you draw your own conclusions. But he'd rather have a ball in his hand than a pen. I can say that's a fair statement with Drew. But that's how he grew up. He was a gym rat and really all that kind of stuff.

So yeah, it doesn't always translate. I used to joke that engineers don't always make good football players. Mike Elgin broke that rule. But yeah, it doesn't hurt.

**Q. When you look at Keegan Johnson, sometimes the states like Iowa and Nebraska are similar to in where it's the one major focus, college football, and he's going back to his hometown, or that home area, and then he's also a legacy player or his dad was a legacy player, and then coupled with that, being young, what do you tell him or do you tell him anything because mentally being that young going back in that kind of environment could have some negative possibilities?**

KIRK FERENTZ: It does. First one is ticket requests. That's number one on the list. There's no getting around that.

So as you're asking that question, I'm sitting there thinking, I'm an optimist, I'm thinking positive thoughts, at least

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

sometimes I'm an optimist, and I'm thinking about (Cole) Fisher going over there and did he have two picks in that game, I think? His last game over there. His dad played down there and brother, also, he had two siblings there. I'm thinking about Jovon Johnson coming up with a pick at Penn State or Ed Hinkel laying out for a big touchdown back at Penn State.

So I'm thinking the positive route, and hopefully he'll be ready to go. But the one thing about him, he just doesn't seem to be affected by anything thus far, knock on wood, hope it stays that way, but he just seems to go out, and he's the same way at practice, just concentrates on what he's doing. That's the best advice anybody can give him right now is just play the game. It's another game, it's a big game, but it's another game and just do your job like you've been doing.

**Q. Noah Fant was kind of that way, too.**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, Noah did okay over there, so that's another one of those positives going. I'm thinking positive.

**Q. Given Keegan's connections with Nebraska, how hard was that recruiting process?**

KIRK FERENTZ: It's always hard, and hopefully it's hard when they come over here and steal our guys, too, because it's happened. It's gone both ways. It's hard, but for whatever reason our message resonated, and ultimately in recruiting you hope the prospect finds a place where he feels most comfortable, and more importantly you hope two, three years later they feel really good about that decision. So far at least I think he's pretty happy.

**Q. How would you assess Tyler Goodson's progress this year?**

KIRK FERENTZ: He's doing well. We talked about the offensive line. Tyler is certainly part of that equation, but everybody in the offense, just our production gets tied in, I'm not trying to trash these guys by any stretch, but if you're looking at it realistically, that's really where our biggest challenges were mainly because of those injuries to Cody and Kyler right off the bat.

We've been playing catch-up pretty much all year, and we're not out of the woods yet, but at least I think the arrow is starting to move the right way. I thought his production Saturday was probably tied in with maybe the improvement we're seeing with the guys up front.

**Q. He seems to handle that roller coaster ride.**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, talking about Keegan, Tyler has been that way, and I said that earlier, he shows up every day happy. Happy is not the right word, but he's got a good energy to him, a good vibe, and he likes practicing, likes his teammates. You don't see him too often look like he's down a little bit, so it's really positive. Nobody wants to be around droopy dog guys, right? It's not much fun. He's not that way at all.

**Q. What do you see as the next step in Arland Bruce's development?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Just keep playing. It's like anybody. It's like those linemen. You've got to keep playing. He's doing a lot of good things. Keegan is doing a lot of good things, and other guys are, too. Charlie as a receiver has grown. All of a sudden now we've got some numbers there instead of being really thin.

**Q. There is something hanging out there in case you guys win and Wisconsin gets beat on Saturday by Minnesota, and that is Big Ten Championship appearance. Have you had discussions with your players about it? Did you address it and say we're not going to talk about it anymore? How do you handle that?**

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, pretty simply, our goal is to win this week, and then right now it's not in our hands, so the only thing we can really worry about is win this game, and that's really what our focus is.

If there is a good thing here, at least we're off Saturday, so we'll watch how things unfold, but if we don't take care of our end of things, it won't matter anyway, so that's really what we've got to focus on.

These guys are in college; they're pretty smart. I think they know what's going on out there, but the biggest thing, it's kind of like trying to get to nine wins, you've got to win eight, so that's kind of the mode we're in right now.

**Q. The offense in November, it may not show statistically but it just feels like the team has made strides each week; is that how it feels to you?**

KIRK FERENTZ: It does, and it's the opposite of what I mentioned two weeks ago, our opponent had 189 yards I think it was, and it felt like 400. So it wasn't as bad as it felt, but it felt bad, and then it's kind of the flip of that, when you can't block consistently up front, it's just hard. It's really hard because you can only scheme so much. It's hard to move the ball without blocking. I guess that's the bottom line, the way we do things. I think now at least we can think realistically we might have a chance to go on

there and develop a little consistency. The thing I've been encouraged by and I was optimistic about probably six weeks ago, I really felt like if guys could practice, we would see improvement, but then are they going to be able to practice because we had guys in and out seems like every other day.

I think we're gaining a little bit of traction here, but it will be another challenge this week. They've got some big guys on that front that are experienced.

**Q. You have players play hurt all the time and those who are set, but to have your center play the kind of game he did having the flu I think it was, when you graded it out, what did you think --**

KIRK FERENTZ: He did fine. You don't want to ever take anything for granted, but you're not surprised. Tyler, it would take a lot to get him out of the lineup. It really would. There's been some instances since he's played where somebody rolls up on him or whatever, he's just -- he shakes it off and keeps playing.

He is just a really nice guy, as you see when you interact with him, but he's a tenacious competitor. A lot of pride.

**Q. Is it hard to prepare for a quarterback when you don't have much to go off of what they do?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it makes it one more challenge. My guess is he fits their scheme, though, so he's a really athletic guy, one of them is, and the other guy is a little bit younger and we don't know quite as much about certainly, but my guess is the scheme is going to stay pretty much the same where we're going to have to defend a lot of things. He's a really athletic guy, so that puts pressure on you when the quarterback can move around like this guy can.

**Q. You've been through a fair share of Thanksgiving days in your career. How do you approach these type of weeks, especially for the younger guys, freshmen who probably haven't been with their families for this first holiday? What do you tell them throughout the week?**

KIRK FERENTZ: There's a great Guy Fieri quote. You can Google it, I guess, but it talks about Thanksgiving and the spirit of the holiday and then also mentions in his quote about there are a lot of people that aren't at home with their families, they're over doing things nationally, internationally to help protect us, those types of things. You can start right there.

I always try to share that at bowl games, too, because a lot

of times we're working over the holidays. First of all, it's a short window for players. For coaches it's kind of a lifetime thing, but there's a lot of other people making sacrifices not to be with their families. They're doing things that are really important. We're getting to play college football.

I think our guys understand that, and then that's one of the extra perks in my opinion about the Black Friday game is at least guys locally on Saturday get to be with their families over the weekend. After potentially maybe an interruption here, at least it's a nice break, and if we do have an interruption to that, that would be fine. Nobody is going to argue about that. I know they understand it. So it all works out. It works out, and it's kind of like a bonus day. You get Saturday off, that's a pretty good deal.

**Q. Are you having a dinner tomorrow night?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah.

**Q. Is there a select group that you always see that eats the most?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I mean, you might be able to imagine that one. That's a slam dunk. The linemen on both sides usually rack up that one easily.

**Q. What have you see from Jack Plumb being able to step into a tough spot and be able to produce?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Last year this was his first start, I'm pretty sure in saying. Of course we still had four games to go last year, a little different scenario.

I think he's grown immensely in that year's time certainly, but most importantly we've really seen it this past month. Like he just keeps working. He's extremely serious, really focused. Grew up in a football family, too, although his parents didn't do it for a living but his granddads did. But he's a good hardworking guy, conscientious, really focuses, kind of kid you want to recruit. That's a profile you look for, and I think he's starting to develop confidence in himself.

Again, you can't hand it to somebody. They've got to earn it out there on the field. So it's been fun to watch that. There's still more there for him, so it's good, and it's encouraging.

**Q. We've talked a lot about the offensive line youth, but the defensive line you've had a lot of young guys step up, Lukas Van Ness, Deontae Craig, Logan Lee. What have you seen especially over the last five, six weeks that have put them on the upward trajectory?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Same thing, and I'd throw Noah Shannon in there. Noah has been here but hasn't played a lot. Logan Lee, in that same category. Logan has had a lot of injuries. Noah has missed a lot of practice time. So that's again what I was referring to. The offense and defense to me are the same in a lot of ways because if you're not out there doing it on a regular basis, it's really hard to start.

You used that term "naturally"; guys look like they're a little bit more natural out there. I personally just think that comes from repetition, repetition. Every now and then you get a guy that just does stuff that you didn't necessarily teach, but most guys, they have to work at it and they need that time, and if you're not doing it on a consistent basis it's hard to get there, but you look at Logan and look at Noah, they had their best game last week, so I think that's a result of them starting to get a little bit comfortable and understanding how to play.

Outside of Zach, who makes up for the other guys, he's 33 years old, we're a pretty young group up there experience-wise but also chronologically, and that's exciting because those guys will keep -- as long as we keep them on the field, they'll keep getting better. We got Hurkett back in the mix; he's a high motor guy. I think we'll get through it, but I was worried about that going into the season just like the offensive side.

**Q. How have you seen Connor approach going from last year playing preps at Kennedy to this year playing Big Ten football?**

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the first comparison I'd give you is Keegan. We talked about Keegan. Connor just -- it's funny, I went and visited him at his high school whenever that was. It was kind of like -- Brady Reiff was the same way. It was like a guy that couldn't wait to get out of high school and get on to his next step. I was like, hey, slow it down, enjoy the prom, all that stuff. But that's how he was, so when he got here last January he was ready. He was ready mentally and excited about being here.

He, like Keegan, doesn't seem overwhelmed out there. Arland the same way. They just kind of seem like they belong and fit. There's a little bit more action than where he's playing, but he's handled it pretty well, and then the same thing, you're seeing more confidence, quicker reaction time now that he's played some instead of just being the first couple games.

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