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University of Iowa Football Media Conference Tuesday, November 24, 2020 Iowa City, Iowa, USA Coach Kirk Ferentz Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Just good afternoon to everybody. Wish everybody a happy Thanksgiving in advance. Came awfully quickly, that's for sure.

Talk a little bit about the Penn State game and move on to this week. As I said the other day, we're thrilled to get the win up there. We knew it was going to be hard-fought. It was. The bottom line is if anybody was at the game or watching the game the score was not indicative of how chose the game was. What you expect in Big Ten play, certainly.

I thought our guys did a good job in the first half, being ready to play. Came out, got off to a good start. Finished the half in good position with the stop

on downs, taking it in for a touchdown, building the lead.

Games are never over. Certainly the end of the third quarter, took me back to 2002, similar circumstances, ended up being an overtime game. Happy with the way the team responded. You never know what is going to happen in those situations. Team responded well, came out with a victory.

A lot of positives coming out of the game. The guys up front on both sides did a good job. When we hit the film on Sunday, there's a lot of things we still need to get a lot better at. That's usually true after any game. Really the case the other day. Certainly a lot of things to work on, but it was a good team win.

That being said, it's a quick turnaround for us and our opponent. You finish Saturday, boom, it's right on you for the next game. We're playing Friday. A short week. Thanksgiving meal here on Wednesday night. Typically we'll have the families, our families, all the coaches and staff families, kind of make it more of a family-type dinner. With the COVID situation right now, it's going to be pretty sterile, just the coaches, players.

We'll do that on Wednesday, then normal travel and pregame routines on Friday, Thursday Friday, which would be our normal Friday Saturday routine. Nothing too monumental about that.

As we turn or attention to Nebraska, we have the same six captains as we did a week ago: Chauncey Golston, Nick Niemann, Matt Hankins, Mekhi Sargent, Tyler Linderbaum, and Keith Duncan.

Really nothing on the injury front other than to say Kyler Schott. Is working his way back now. He won't start the game, but he'll play. I don't know what kind of condition he's in right now. We'll have to see how that goes. We're going to get him back into the mix. Coy Cronk might have a chance. We'll see what that looks like as we go along.

Moving on to Nebraska, a couple things. Obviously we have a lot of respect for their program. Strong tradition they have there. Just very strong fan base. Very loyal, supportive fan base, just like we enjoy. A lot of respect for them.

I think you look at this, it's a trophy game. Really all you have to do is look at the last two games since Coach Frost has been there. We played two really competitive games against each other, literally went down to the last play in both games. That's what you expect from a rivalry game. I would expect more of that this week.

That's what we're trying to prepare for right now. I'm sure they're going to be a determined football team. We're not sure which quarterback we'll see. I do know this: they're both extremely dangerous. That's going to be a tough, tough preparation for our defensive football team.

Offensively, they play a 34 scheme. That's a whole different set of circumstances trying to match your offense against a 34 team.

We don't have a lot of time to practice, but we have to make good use of the time we have, our meeting times as well, because it's tough preparation on both sides.

That being said, there's no school this week. That's a little bit unusual. Everyone has time to really do what they need to do. Hopefully they don't have too much time where they get distracted, do other kinds of things.

Once again, being back in Kinnick. Sorry our fans can't be there, but we appreciate their support. The Wave, having a chance to look to the kids and their families on Friday. All of us know, a tough situation, but over the holidays, hospitals, are a real

challenge. Hopefully we bring a little daylight into all their lives on Friday. We'll look forward to that certainly.

Q. Right tackle, we saw Mark Kallenberger exit. Do you expect him to start? Jack Plumb looked like he played pretty okay, I guess.

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see how Mark looks. He left the game. If he doesn't go, we'll go Jack Plumb. Jack is the next guy in. Thought he did a good job. Went in there for a lot of snaps. Did a good job when he was in there.

Any bit of playing time, as I've said in the past, is really valuable if they haven't played a lot. Got that opportunity a couple weeks back, which was really good. We'll go with the guys we have. If Mark can't go, then Jack will be the guy, for sure.

Q. You had three different true freshmen that have been in your two-deep on offensive line and defensive line. Mason Richman, Tyler Ellsbury. On the other side Yahya Black. Usually you have guys that are farther from the ball on that spot. What can you tell us about those guys and why they are in that position? Do they have bright futures for you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Hopefully all three of them have bright futures. Feel really good about our freshmen class in its entirety.

I will usually use the term 'pseudo-second team', if you will. Had some injuries, guys out on both sides. That's opened up some spots. All three of those guys have done a good job.

Quite frankly, if they're in there at the start of the game or a critical time, I don't mind telling you I'll be a little bit nervous about it, in all three cases. I don't mean that disrespectfully at all. They're just not ready to play competitive football.

One moment of levity. Yahya got in the other day, he was being way too respectful of their left tackle. Almost looked like he's asking for permission to step across the line on the guy. That's what young players do. He's not like that in practice, I can assure you.

Came to one of our camps two years ago, was one of the most impressive campers we've had come through here in a couple decades. He's a very aggressive prospect. I think he has a good future. We're excited about that. But he's not ready to play 60 snaps in a game right now.

We have a couple guys out, so it's great for him. He's not ready for primetime yet. I'd say the same thing about both of our offensive linemen.

Q. With Phil Parker and Seth Wallace, they seem like they really work together well. Almost appears on the field a lot of times Wallace is the one barking out the direction. How do you feel about that dynamic? I know Phil gets a lot of credit, but Seth probably deserves quite a bit, too.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we have a really good staff overall. There's no question Phil and Seth work well together. Seth came up, was kind of raised in the system, if you will. Our system has been in place, not that we haven't tweaked or adjusted it, we do that in every phase, the roots of the system really started back in '99. Obviously Phil and Norm had a great relationship.

Phil has been here every day that we've been here. He's one of the first hires we made. He certainly has a good idea what it is we're looking for as a program. Has done a great job as a coordinator.

Seth has been a great addition. Seth cut his teeth as a GA with Norm, was in the program for three years, went off and grew as a young coach. Great to have him back. I can say about the same thing about KB and Jay up front, Jay is the newest member of the group, but KB has done a great job with the defensive line. Those guys are growing and improving weekly. I think everyone would agree on that, that we are a much better defensive line than we were three weeks ago.

That's what the game is all about. It's all about teamwork with the staff as much as it is the players. I'd say the same thing with the offensive staff. There's a lot of discussion, we're in the room together a lot as units, offense and defense. A lot of good discussions.

Nobody has the trump card. The best thing is get the best idea, take it out on the field, see if our players can execute it. That's how teams work, a lot of different personalities on coaching staffs and teams. That's what kind of makes it all interesting.

Q. Since this rivalry kind of rekindled, thinks the 10th year playing yearly now, does it feel like this is a big-time rivalry? You've had other games you've played against other teams more often. Do you think this is creating the buzz?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm only smiling because my four year association with it, outside of the last 10, wasn't much of a rivalry. We beat them here in '81 my first year as an assistant coach. Didn't turn out so well my first game here as a head coach back here in '99.

But when Nebraska joined the Big Ten, I think that was a great thing for certainly the Big Ten, hopefully they feel the same way. It made sense, we're border states, to try to initiate something that way. It's kind of interesting now. We have them on one border, Minnesota, Illinois, Northwestern semi-border if you will, maybe a little bit different being more of a city school, then Wisconsin. We have a lot of border rivalries. One of the neat things about our conference. It's certainly grown.

One thing about in our conference, every conference game is really important. You can't say, 'hey, this one is more important than the other.' They're all critically, important.

Q. This is the second straight game you have to prepare for two different quarterbacks. Is it different this week in any way than it was last week when you look at the similarities or differences?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. I would answer it this way off the top of my head. The systems are very different, right? I think with Penn State, what they do with their quarterback, we kind of feel like both quarterbacks were equally dangerous. We had a lot of respect for both of them.

I would not compare Nebraska's scheme necessarily to Penn State's in the X's and O's part. I would compare it that both quarterbacks are again very dangerous. They can hurt you maybe in a different way than the guys from Penn State hurt you. Getting hurt is getting hurt, doesn't matter how it is.

Both these guys are capable of making plays with their feet, with their arm and their head. It's one of those deals where there's a lot of pressure on your defense at every position because both these quarterbacks can run, they can get outside and throw it, they can get outside and run it. That makes it a big challenge for us.

Q. It's been a long time since you beat three Big Ten teams as thoroughly as you have the last three weeks. Why is this happening?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're playing better. I mean, that's probably the simple answer. When you're playing better, you have a chance.

Like I said, even last week, score ended up being a pretty good gap. If you look at the stats, they're pretty close. If you're at the game, I don't think any of us on our side were feeling overly confident in that fourth quarter. They had us right there in a really vulnerable position. All they needed to do was score, get an on-side kick, they're knocking right on the door. In the conference, you can't relax. We did have a chance maybe a couple weeks before.

I can assure you, nobody in our camp saw it coming in either case. Sometimes it just happens. I think it's a credit to our guys playing better football. I think our guys are for the most part staying focused for the full 60 minutes. That sometimes is easier said than done.

Q. You guys have really controlled the line of scrimmage on both sides against Nebraska the last five meetings. How important has that been to the outcome? How do you explain your dominance there?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know if 'dominance' is the word. We've done some good things up front. They've had some good things happen to them, too.

The bottom line is, especially these last two years, it's literally come down to that last play. There's nothing easy. This won't be easy. We know that. They're going to come in here ready to go.

The other factor is I don't think home or away matters. We expect it to be a really tough, hard-fought game. Sounds like the weather is going to be decent. That's

good. It gets down to the team that probably makes the least amount of mistakes, doesn't give up easy things, easy plays, can play the full game.

There's no boxes checked right now on our side. We're going to have to go out and try to play better than we have the last couple weeks. The score was good last week, but there were a lot of things we left the door open on. Have to get that taken of here a little quicker.

I can think of a pass play we didn't have covered, luckily the quarterback didn't get there. Or that scenario I just described might have happened where all of a sudden it's a six-point game and they're on-side kicking. We've been a little lucky, too. I just hate to rely on luck.

Q. When you look at Cody Ince, he's a bear hunter from Wisconsin, can dunk a basketball, seems pretty athletic. What did he show you to make you think he could be a good guard? How has he improved over the last couple weeks to put himself to be in a position to put himself on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know about the bear hunter part. I'm more interested in him being a blocker. Anyway, he's a great young guy, great family. I knew he was an outdoors guy. Didn't know that.

We talked a couple minutes ago about those freshmen that are on our pseudo-two deep. Cody is probably a good example of those guys, right? With all due respect, those guys aren't ready to play 60-70 snaps right now. Cody certainly wasn't.

We could see right off the bat he had the potential to become a good lineman here. He's had some serious injury issues the last couple of years. When I say 'serious', not life-threatening, but the kind of that take you out of the mix for weeks or even months sometimes. So it's hard to get better. It's hard to develop, work your craft when you're just watching from the sidelines. You can work the mental part. So I think some of his growth has been impeded that way.

This year, again, I was going to say training camp, such a weird year, but we could just see him probably start gaining some ground, get a little confidence. First of all, he's been able to stay healthy, knock on wood, sustain some practices together.

He's just kind of developing and growing. That's what we hope those true freshmen we talked about a little while ago are going to do as well.

Cody is a talented guy. I think he could play all five positions. Haven't said that about many players that have come here. I think he probably could. Also he didn't have five or six weeks of practice. I think he is starting to develop a little bit of that. He's starting to realize he can play successfully, maybe a little bit better than that even with more work.

I don't want to speak for him, but I think he's pretty excited about that. Seems like he's been doing a good job. He does it in a quiet fashion, a quiet young guy. That's kind of how he works, kind of how he plays. The end product is pretty good.

Q. It's easy for us to see how well Goodson and Sargent are playing. What do you think has made them so effective this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think we're playing better as an entire team. That helps. But both of them, they're both a year older. Mekhi has played a lot of good football here, right. Tyler got off to a good start last year as a first-year guy.

Time on the field and time in the program, time practicing, training, all those things add up to maybe giving yourself a chance to be a better player as you get older. That's how it's supposed to work. Both those guys are illustrations of doing that.

The commonality between both of them is they have great attitudes, great guys on the team. I'm sure they have off days and all that, but they don't bring it out to the field. They're positive out there. They like football. They both do, they really like football. Mekhi, it's interesting, I'm not trying to knock a junior college, any junior college program, he came from Iowa Western. Great program, unbelievable facilities. Way better than we had at Maine, I can tell you.

He has a real appreciation for being in a Division I program where there's a training table, all those kinds of things. A lot less bus rides than coaching at Iowa Western or Maine. You got those bus rides in front of you. He appreciates every day, a tremendous guy.

Mekhi is playing great on special teams, too. I think that gives you a window, both he and Ivory Kelly-Martin are playing really well on special teams. They're doing it because they want to do it. That's a really good sign. That's part of the reason we're having success right now. Two guys that can be starting right now. Playing special teams, they're good at them all.

Q. It's an interesting year all the way around for a million reasons. The eligibility question that all of your players, this is a free year per se. I'm sure each and every one of them has a different story. Have you had any kind of conversations with the players or staff about which ones may come back, which ones might want to come back, which ones won't? How has that gone so far?

KIRK FERENTZ: As staff we probably spent about three minutes last week talking about it. It's probably about two minutes too long.

I interviewed all of our seniors back, man, before one of our starts. I guess it would have been in September probably, late September, before we actually got going again. That was probably a waste of time, too. Things change every day. How people think, how they're seeing things. None of us knew what this season was going to be. We still don't know how the next four weeks are going to go. Glad we got a practice in. Happy about that today. That's how we're all looking at the world right now, tight focus.

The good news is it dawned on my last week that players aren't going to be here in January, we can't recruit in January, so I guess we have a lot of time to think about stuff like that. God only knows what else we'll be doing.

It's going to be kind of weird. This whole thing, just one more step in the process. It's a great point. We'll figure it out whenever it's appropriate. The answer I can give you for the players, the picture will become more clear here over the next six, eight weeks, where they kind of see what the landscape looks like for them.

Q. With the uniqueness of the season, how has that changed things for the younger guys in the program, the true freshmen, in terms of the weekly routine, their preparation?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't say enough about these freshmen, the first-year guys. That goes back to June. I think they're the ones who have paid the biggest price, me personally. Maybe the older guys on a mental side because they're looking at what should be their senior year, third, fourth year in the program where they kind of got the routine down, all that.

If you think about our freshmen, typically they come in in June, they're plugged in, six hours of class, they're training on a regular basis, six hours of class where they're actually interfacing with other students, getting to know their way around town, all that kind of stuff.

These guys got here, got locked up in the dorm basically. Everybody's social life... The academic, we pulled the plug on academics, the university did, for obvious reasons. The first-year guys weren't in school this summer. They trained, came over, trained, then went home.

I felt really badly for them. Not like we could do any team functions or things like that because of the virus. Everything was virtual, that type of stuff.

Can't say enough about these guys. They don't seem to be affected by it. They just kind of have been day after day, show up, good attitude, they work hard. As I mentioned earlier, alluded to earlier, we're really pleased with the whole group, a really good group of guys. I don't want to say it was a poorly designed summer, but you would never design one like this intentionally unless you didn't like the people you were doing it for.

They've been positive guys. All work hard. Show up, great to be around. Really anxious to get them into the normal world, whenever that time comes. It will be really good.

I think they've paid the biggest price, I really do. Hopefully this will be the last year like this where it's just so restricted in every regard.

But they've stayed the course, same with our older guys. Like anything you do in life, right? Situations arise, you just try to deal with them the best way you can. There's no sense worrying about it or crying about it, complaining about it because

it is what's it is and you try to deal with it, support each other. All our guys have done a good job of that.

Q. It seemed like Spencer is starting to settle in more to his role at quarterback. Two of his better passes of the season. How have you kind of seen Spencer progress over the last couple weeks? Do you think that Saturday was a step in right direction for him?

KIRK FERENTZ: It sounds like there's been a lot of chatter on that topic the last couple weeks. As I tried to say earlier, we've had a lot of first-year quarterbacks play pretty well here historically. All those guys got to go through a normal spring, 15 days of practice over four and a half weeks. A lot of time to meet, digest, watch tape, run the offense hands on, make mistakes, all those things. Then they have the luxury of having the entire summer to do their seven-on-sevens with their teammates. Watch film, spring ball, watch the horrible throws they make, all that stuff that everybody does as you start to ascend into a starting position, if you will.

Spencer didn't have that afforded to him. I just mentioned the freshmen. Them being in isolation, basically all of our guys were in some form or fashion. It just hasn't been normal.

I can't say enough about him. We're really pleased with what he's doing. We think he's on the right path, got a good feel out there, good sense. He's going to make mistakes, every player does. Every new players certainly makes mistakes.

As coaches we've seen enough of him pretty extensively. All we can do is compare him to guys that have come through. We think he's got the right attributes to be a really good quarterback for us. The next step is actually doing it on the field.

I just alluded to that, the Penn State game in '02. You go back two weeks before that game, we had a total meltdown. Brad Banks was pretty much at the center of it. I think it's one of the greatest stories in college football, my personal opinion, I'm a little biased. A lot of guys would have tanked it after that meltdown. Bad day for him, bad day for our whole team. Quarterbacks always feel more responsibility.

That's the essence of Brad Banks. He got right back up on his feet, went to work with a great attitude. He's the reason we beat Penn State in 2002 and proceeded to run the table on the conference. He was our MVP, AP Player of the Year, Big Ten Player of the Year. That's a guy who failed miserably in week three or four, whatever it might have been. That's football. That's life. That's what you learn from.

I'm not predicting Spencer is going to have a meltdown. I hope that doesn't happen. If it does, we're not going to abandon ship because we've seen enough of him, just like we saw enough of Brad, go right down the list. That's how this game is. It's a hard game. It humbles you. It's all about what you do when the stuff hits the fan a little bit.

Q. Do you expect Waggoner back next week, not this week?

KIRK FERENTZ: Hoping to get him working back, yeah.

Q. We got to talk about Nico Ragaini's family. Described as a big Italian family. Is that as entertaining as it sounds? Have you gotten to meet them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Recruiting changed so much. Nico was a guy we liked in high school. Didn't have room for him in that recruiting class. That's how smart we were, right? Experts in recruiting, we're supposed to be (smiling).

He went to the prep school, then came here. He just got here, right? I never really met him. I met his dad February 28th. I can tell you the date because it was at a Nike clinic I'm obligated to do in Connecticut.

The rest of the story is I'm a little bit on the older side, right? My first year in college was the last year of freshman football, 'freshman football', the fall of '73. Andy Baylock was our freshman football coach, had been there six or seven years, something like that, I don't know. Unbelievable guy. Unbelievable human being. Unbelievable coach, for a guy to be the freshmen football coach.

Andy was also the assistant baseball coach at UConn. Had a very good program. Still do. Andy was a long time baseball coach there, still one of the best ambassadors for the University athletic department there is.

The rest of the story is Nico's dad played for Andy. He's a tremendous baseball player. Give Andy a call, he'll answer it, two-hour call. He'll tell you about Nico's dad, a tremendous player at the University of Connecticut. Both Coach Baylock and Nico's dad were at the clinic on the 28th. Great to see Coach Baylock again, great to meet Nico's dad. They're a great family.

Nico is everything we want in a football player. Just a tremendous young man. Really glad he's on our team.

Q. When you bring up recruiting, you have a dead period for 12 months. On a sidenote as a parent of two college-aged students, I can't imagine sending somebody off to college without visiting it in person.

KIRK FERENTZ: That's the normal world now. You're talking about a normal world (smiling).

Q. You have X number of commits right now for the December period. What is the next couple of months going to be like for you? Do you anticipate a big push for December? Are you going to try to wait for February?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's kind of like the last question you asked. I really haven't given a lot of thought other than I can answer it this way. Going backwards on the calendar, we got shut down on the 13th of March. It was pretty apparent we weren't going anywhere, right, for a while. We didn't have a lot to do. We were recruiting. We were Zooming, FaceTime, all that stuff. It is what it is.

But, like, that was recruiting, if you will. So we feel great about this class. I just mentioned the first-year guys on campus right now, it's been great to work with these guys. We feel the same way about this class. They committed. They cast their vote, if you will, at a very unusual time.

I think we all feel like we know these guys really well right now. We all kind of like 'em. That was neat but weird because that's the way we felt back in May or June. This class is in pretty good shape. Our attention has to go forward. That's interesting because some of those guys didn't play this year, right? There's a significant amount of people that we're trying to evaluate that didn't play this fall. That makes it difficult. Certainly they couldn't come to camps last year. Makes it more difficult.

We're going to have to figure that one out. Again, like I said, we have plenty of time once the season is over. Literally now it's day to day. We have to get ready for Friday. Bigger story is what do we have to do to finish today up.

We'll have plenty of time for it. We have a couple people in the office thinking about it, that's their job. They'll keep us apprised if there's something we need to know, I guess.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

KIRK FERENTZ: Thank you. Happy Thanksgiving.

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