

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Monday, December 16, 2019

Kirk Ferentz

KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Appreciate everyone being here.

First and foremost, if I was here last Sunday, first thing I would have said is just how thrilled we are to get invited to the Holiday Bowl. It's a great opportunity for our whole football team, one we're very excited about. A first-class bowl experience. I know that personally from a hundred years ago. Heard that from other Big Ten counterparts that have participated. Really excited about that.

Before we talk about that and the game itself, just want to take one minute and look backwards. Had a chance to have our banquet yesterday. Just had a great opportunity to honor the entire team, all the accomplishments, a lot of individuals that did a really nice job this past year.

Certainly our guys have a lot to be proud of, the fact that they won nine games this year with an opportunity to win a 10th, big challenge to win a 10th. Eighteen in two years, which is certainly significant. I'm not sure where that ranks us, but that's significant. Not an easy accomplishment.

I think right along with that the fact that any loss that we've been involved with over the last two years basically went down to the last minute of play, whatever that is, eight games, seven, whatever it may be.

Our guys can be really proud of the way they've competed, the way they've prepared, gone out and done that on a regular basis which is easy to say but a little tougher to do. Our guys have done a great job of meeting that challenge. We have a big one coming up.

Forty-six wins over the last five years which puts us in good standing historically with this program. It's equal to the best over any five-year period there is. Our guys can be really proud of that.

Beyond that, I think they've done a great job in the classroom; 38 Academic All-Big Ten players, 16 total Academic All-Americans, 358 Academic All-Big Ten players now since we've been here. Very, very proud of that. Ultimately that's what it's all about. I want our guys to achieve the goal of earning their degree. Not easy to do. Something our guys have done a really good job of.



We're proud of that.

A couple other notes. I want to congratulate publicly the guys, Keith Duncan, who was at the awards show the other night, Thursday night. Unfortunately he came up short. Great season. All the recognition he's gotten.

Same thing with A.J. Epenesa and Tristan Wirfs. First-team Walter Camp, which is prestigious deal. Those guys certainly deserve some recognition for that.

The last component, we talk about the importance and the value of community service, just being involved in the community, giving back, realizing how fortunate all of us are to be involved in college athletics. Our guys continue to do that. Really proud of them and the kind of citizenship they exhibit on a daily basis. Really proud of our football team, what they've accomplished so far.

Moving forward, really thrilled to be invited, sincere appreciation and thanks to Mark Neville, who is the president of the Holiday Bowl committee, their entire committee, for having faith in our football team and inviting us to such a great ballgame.

I think Iowa fans, at least some that have been around for a while, know what a great experience it is. It's a tremendous venue to host a bowl. They do a great job as a committee of making everybody feel extremely welcome. I think our players can be really excited about that opportunity.

Also part of the equation, this has been an unusual preparation. Really is going to require some flexibility, already has, because it's unusual in terms of the calendar setup. Thanksgiving fell late this year. We're in finals right now. This is not a week of preparation for us, a clean week. We're just trying to get an hour here, an hour there.

We'll really kind of start in earnest Friday afternoon or almost Friday evening. It's really atypical, really feels more like we had a double bye than it does getting ready for a bowl prep. Everything we've done in the past, threw that out, started from scratch. The exact opposite of the time we played Southern Cal in the Orange Bowl. We had about 12 weeks to get ready for that one. That's probably worse, quite frankly, because you really get screwed up that way. We put a plan

together. Hopefully it will bear some fruit. We'll see what all happens.

Going back to the San Diego aspect, a lot of really nice things. The San Diego Zoo, which I talked to one of our players yesterday, he's really excited about that, Cedrick Lattimore, who went to the Detroit Zoo. Coincidentally I went there when I was about four. Interesting what a kid's perspective is. It is a great zoo. I think you kind of lose time really quickly when you get there. We'll tour the USS Roosevelt, which I've been told will be a great experience for our guys. Then they have a luncheon.

A lot of good things out there. Somebody is complaining about their weather, a little chilly, in the 60s. Obviously they're not from the Midwest. The weather part of it is really exciting, as well.

The bottom line is we're going out there to play a game against a really outstanding opponent. You don't have to say much, if you think about USC, the tradition of that program, the success they've had, the great individual players, the coaches that have gone through there. It's a who's who.

I really don't know a lot about their football team right now other than they've had a couple close losses, a lot of good victories. I've not seen one play of film. I'm just going to take a wild guess they've got good players. We don't recruit in the same neighborhood probably since Tony Moeaki and Dace Richardson came through.

They have really elite players. I know they have a freshman quarterback that stepped in, did a great job, great receivers. We're going to have our work cut out for us, that's for sure.

Looking forward to getting started in that aspect, all of us as coaches, kicking into that phase right now. Hopefully we'll be a little bit more knowledgeable here at the end of the week.

Bottom line is we're going to have to do a great job of utilizing what time we do have. When we're practicing, as limited as it may be, we have to be spot on with our practice and preparation so we can go out and play to the best of our ability. It's going to take every chance of that to have a chance to play successfully against a team like this.

With that, I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. After the '14 season, you changed things up, called it a reboot at the time. The numbers suggest it's worked. What do you attribute it to? Is there one or two things have been the biggest keys?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it really began more so after

the '12 season. That was certainly a disappointing year. Like basically just disappointing. That really amped up or heightened our sense of awareness, doing little things a little bit better. That's usually what it gets down to.

To your point, we slid backwards, had a couple losses in '14 that were really hard to live with. That's to me how you evaluate a season, if you have a handful of those. Really that's what we did. We had more than one in that season.

We did change with the morning practice, all that. Again, you keep learning in life. Hopefully you're doing a better job every day. As you move to the next day, hopefully you learn something from what you did that day, try to do a little bit better job.

In our community, it's all about everybody being on the same page. That's what makes football a little bit unique and different. If you have a lot of coaches, certainly a lot of players, a lot of support staff members, everyone has to be carrying the same message, doing it on a daily basis. I think we've done a little better job of that.

There's always a great challenge, great thing about sport, always things to learn, contemplate, think about. This whole schedule has made us give a lot of thought, make sure we're not screwing this thing up. We'll know more in about two weeks.

That's part of the fun, it is really stimulating trying to put the puzzles together sometimes.

Q. What is Brandon Smith's availability?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's working back. I'm not going to say he's ready to go, but he is working back, and that's encouraging. He was on the field Saturday and this morning. It's encouraging.

Q. What sort of lessons can a younger player learn from Devonte and the things he showed?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really interesting. Devonte got selected as our special teams captain yesterday. I think it's a great story, it really is. The thing about the banquet, we could have been there seven hours yesterday, if you tell every player's story. That is the best part about all this, we get to live it and experience that with them. That's what it's all about.

Devonte is really good. He came in four years ago, played some as a freshman. With all due respect, we just didn't have much depth at that position, so he got some playing time. As he went along, some other players moved beyond him or past him. Ended up beating him out.

It's always interesting. You can say the same thing about Keith Duncan. Players have a couple choices when things don't go their way. Like losing a game, you can pout, which is okay for a little bit, then you choose to go back to work and try to do something about it, or you can just surrender and leave, or just stay at the bottom of the depth chart, not worry about it.

In his case, he just kept working hard. Found a niche on special teams. Has done a great job for us for a couple years that way. The hidden part of it is every day in practice he's out there working like crazy against our defense. He's listed as a defensive back I think on the roster, but he's playing receiver position during practices.

I said yesterday, I think he's the first guy to win the team player, scout team Player of the Week award, for preparing our team, also a team captain. It's a great story there, just like Dunc losing his job to Miguel, then just kept working hard, going right through, follow up with Caleb. I always mention Caleb when I mention Dunc because he's right there with him.

Q. With the short prep, do you lose developmental time?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a big part of it, sure is. That's disappointing because we're a developmental program. Whatever it may be, those calendar hours, we just can't make them up. That's the way it goes. Have to do a better job in the spring.

Q. What have you seen from your backup quarterbacks right now, after next week will be challenging for the starting job?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see how it all goes. They're doing a good job competing with each other. Spencer still takes the two reps. We've let him work with the ones a little bit at times. Nate has had a lot of snaps. They're all doing a good job, moving forward. I'd reserve judgment on the whole group until we get them where we're really competing with those guys on equal footing.

Q. How about Nate, how would you summarize this season, evaluate his season?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's just funny you bring that up because somebody made a comment to me somewhere in the last two or three weeks about he's a target, via social media, a lot of angst. Image that, quarterback coordinator, or head coach being criticized.

I just happened to think about that while I was sitting there yesterday, he was up there getting his 12th award. I thought of two things really quickly: like I don't know anything about any of that stuff, and I don't care.

All I know is what I know about him as a person and player.

Boy, I'm so glad he played with us. He's had a tremendous career. Has he hit every throw? The answer is no. All you got to do is the last game we played, the last three balls he threw were pretty impressive. Ragaini, hit two guys right down the middle, LaPorta catching the last one. All three of those balls were right on the money. I don't know how many guys could make those throws.

You can look at what people don't do, flaws they may have, bad plays, we've all had those. I choose to look at the ones that were clutch plays for us, that allowed us not to go to overtime.

Q. Any of those big secrets, Eric Steinbach going from tight end?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not yet. I don't know if we'll have any until spring. Nothing on the horizon at this point.

Q. You've been down the road with guys exploring or putting their name, NFL stuff. How have you approached that with A.J. and Tristan?

KIRK FERENTZ: Same way. We talked probably right after the Nebraska game that Wednesday I guess it was. Anyway, I think the world changes. We're looking at ninth graders now. Go to ninth grade basketball games, not to see a grandkid or my own kid. Now we're watching prospects, right? I'm exaggerating but that day is coming.

Anyway, the NFL is in a whole different mode, too. They've done evaluations already whereas maybe two years ago they were scrambling around. We're in the process, like every year, of gathering information.

My point is that the information now is a little bit more in-depth and probably accurate. The only variable with all this stuff is nobody knows how many juniors are going to come out. Record number last year. May be bigger or smaller. They have a decent poll of what that looks like.

When we finish the process, we're a team or two away from getting those things compiled. Since we're playing so early, I think the discussions are going to come after the bowl. If we were playing in January, it might be a little more aggressive at this end. There's really nothing to talk about at this point.

Q. Three guys that shared they were exploring were Geno, the two mentioned.

KIRK FERENTZ: Those are the only three I know. As far as I know, that's it.

Q. Is this still a learning process for you as far as NFL guys? You've done that throughout your career, but you talk about colleges recruiting. It's the NFL, too.

KIRK FERENTZ: It has. They've been forced to. I'm pretty sure anybody that is worth their salt in the NFL will tell you what they tell me when we agree upon it. I always tell those guys, I know you guys would rather get them after four instead of three. Everybody would. Maybe there might be a couple exceptions, if Herschel Walker was coming out right now, somebody like that.

In general, they'd much rather get a guy that is at least four years down the road where they're more mature. You can't compare NFL football to any other sport. It's very unique. Unfortunately most people don't understand that, people that are making those decisions sometimes. You get with and are playing against a bunch of men. It's a really hard, physical, long season. It's one of those deals.

The other reality is we try to make sure players understand the agents are selling 'get to your second contract quicker'. First thing is get there, you got to get there. Making the team is hard. Getting to the second contract takes a lot of ability, skill and luck.

Let's say you get to your second contract, play a year. What's the difference between being 28, 29, 30 at the end of your career? Some guys play into their 30s. We got to see Marshal playing the other night. I talked to him this morning. I talked to Reese this morning. Said, Marshal is running around like a little kid. He is having a ball. Standing in the parking lot two hours after the game, t-shirt and jeans, it is 28 degrees, whatever. Those kind of stories are unique. We've had a bunch of them. Some of those guys are on that wall over there.

Reality is most guys don't last more than four. Six years is really nice career. It's like anything, the trick is to get people to see the big picture, what have you.

I'll tell you, if a guy is just itching to leave, they are better off leaving. It's the best thing for them. It's like recruiting, I tell every prospect, I'm not going to make a decision for you. I'm not going to pretend that's my decision because it's not. Same thing with our guys. We just try to give them accurate information.

They have to do what's in their heart. Our job is to make sure they have a good picture of what it might look like. All that being said, nobody knows what the variables are, how many guys are coming out at your position.

The NFL, they know what the board looks like right now. I can tell you this, right now they're a lot more knowledgeable about the total board as opposed to

years past, three guys are coming in on the 28th, these five guys. They know who is out there now. They don't talk about it.

We might have to break that down one, too. I talked to one guy about revamping how we talk about it with them. We won't talk about our juniors with them right now. They appreciate that. I'm knocking on their door now, What's the deal on your end? Whatever.

Q. You have a bowl thing to go to. I imagine you feel just a slight bit guilty not recruiting.

KIRK FERENTZ: We're not allowed to recruit right now. We're grounded finally.

Q. You have things you have to do. You're away from here on a big recruiting day.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it would be nice to be here. I'll have to do those calls, I'll make those communications Tuesday night. I'll have a window in the morning where I'll be able to talk. I'll get all the guys covered. It's just not quite the same.

To that end, too, the way the world has changed, most of these guys have been committed to us for months. Common sense would say signing would have been somewhere in the summertime. That will probably be about a decade before we catch up to that one. Anyway, that's the way it goes. Don't try to make sense of our rules.

Remember the visit rule, where they had the visits? They made signing, whenever it was, moved up to the spring to get the visits January 1st or whatever. They finally changed that rule. It's too late. It doesn't matter now. Everybody has their budget set, right?

It's just how the NCAA works. I am making fun of them, but I'm not criticizing them. It's so cumbersome, they can't keep up with the reality of what's going on in our world. Deal with it.

Q. Seems like you've built up a comfort level going to ninth grade basketball games for football players. Do you think the process, is it on the line of healthy?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, it's not. It's not healthy. I'll just give you an example. We were meeting a week ago, two weeks ago, probably two weeks ago on this one, one of our coaches after the first week had seen a guy we're very interested in, he's very interested in us. He's currently a junior.

The coach made a comment about how much better he looks than he did back in June. I'm thinking he's 15 or 16. Kids change. Kids change so much. They change in college, then they change when they're in the NFL

for the first couple years.

That's the whole problem or challenge with this whole world we're living in. It's not going to change. It just forces us to project. It's a hard thing to do. Yeah, the younger you go... Some guys look like they look they look now four years ago. But that is not usually the case, at least not where we go shopping.

Q. Is a freshman in high school the earliest you offered?

KIRK FERENTZ: You guys probably know better than I. I think so. I think we have. I don't know. Offer and hold my breath.

Q. This class seems to be drama-free, in comparison to the last late one, Tristan and A.J.'s class, what happened in the middle. How were you able to recover?

KIRK FERENTZ: You have a better memory. I move on. I'll take you for your word.

Q. How are you guys able to recover? Geno (Stone), we all know. Ihmir (Smith-Marsette). You had to recover kind of late.

KIRK FERENTZ: Basically you do what you have to do. That's one of my big fears, to that point. The early signing concept... How many players do we have in the NFL that we offered January plus or weren't smart enough to offer, they came here as walk-ons?

That's one thing we lead USC on, I promise you that, because their guys don't get offered in January. That's part of our strength. You're talking about the great stories yesterday. Geno (Stone) is one of our captains. Talked to his mom probably two weeks ago, complimented her again. She's the one who physically, her and the coach, stuffed him in the car, made him come out here.

With all due respect, where he was going, that's where he'd be right now. He wouldn't be going to San Diego right now, he'd be home drinking eggnog and singing Christmas carols. You wonder how many players are out there like that. That scares me because we've had so many good players. Micah Hyde, Desmond, Brandon Myers, Josey (Jewell), who still thinks we're nuts and is probably right. That's one thing that concerns you.

Q. That year in particular, the no-visit policy, is that the same?

KIRK FERENTZ: Not really. If you want to be committed, be committed. If you don't, that is fine, too. We can come back and revisit. Say what you mean, mean what you say, one of those deals. We still operate that way. That's probably why we don't have a

lot of drama right now. Doesn't mean these guys are all good players. We think they are. We're really excited about the whole class coming in.

Yeah, like players that don't have drama. That's what this team has done a really good job. We haven't had much drama this year. That's one of the reasons, you talk about winning close games, doing things, we're not distracted by some stupid high school drama over here when we're trying to get ready to win a football game. That really helps. With all due respect to high school drama (laughter).

Q. Do you think you'll be done Wednesday?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think pretty close. There's always a couple possibilities. You never know what's going to happen. With our roster, I'll probably know more about that in January. We'll learn as we go.

I mean, I encourage our coaches to continue to look for the Geno's or Micah Hyde's, who is out there we're missing right now. We're missing something. LaPorta. Probably somebody out there we're overlooking right now. Who is that guy?

Q. Old news, but we haven't talked to you since the Nebraska game. Did you file anything about the officiating to the Big Ten? Hear anything back?

KIRK FERENTZ: We turned some stuff in and heard some stuff back.

I will just say this to make me feel better or probably make all of us feel better. Season's over, right? We finished on Friday. Home Saturday, Sunday. We finally get to watch TV, watch football games. Never get to do that in season.

It's not unique to us and it certainly is not unique. I was at a game last Sunday that was unbelievably -- I'll stay it straight, I'm not coaching in the NFL, I am not going to get fined. I mean, the officiating was terrible in that game. That cost the team that lost the game in my opinion. Two of them were right where I was sitting.

If they can't get it right in the NFL, and I hear it every day when I come in on the radio, the pass interference replay rule, the flag deal, made it worse. It's a challenge everywhere. I'm not so sure right now we just couldn't get rid of replay, quite frankly, and going back to the guys that are roughing it rough it.

It's a hard job. I did hear somebody really smart talk about this, too. I'm in full agreement on this is a smart, knowledgeable person in that league talked about the amount of changes they've made and their interpretations over 10 years. You think about that. Each year you change four things or three things. Over 10 years how that compounds, right? It's like money in

the bank.

It's fine for the guys on those committees, but the guys officiating on the field look like a bunch of clowns because they've made it so hard. I think that's happened in our game, too. I worry about that. You're making this almost impossible. If you're a good guy, why would you want to go out there and do this when you're getting set up to fail? It's really a hard deal. It's a concern.

Coincidentally, Kansas City, 1994 we played, we just got so sucked into the officiating that day that we totally forget to play. Cost us the game probably. Adopted the attitude, it's the weather, just deal with it.

I'll compliment the officials in our conference, I think they all work hard out there. They're conscientious and they work as hard as they possibly can. Never going to be perfect. But this replay stuff is crazy. Somebody explained to me why the guy on the field isn't in charge of making the final decision? He's the guy in charge, right, the guy with the white hat? He gets to put a vote in, I guess. I don't know. Seems silly to me. I don't know. Backwards.

Q. (Question about the transfer portal.)

KIRK FERENTZ: That is different than the no-visit policy in my mind. Every player is in a different situation with a different set of circumstances. They're in our program. It's like every decision I make discipline-wise, academics supervision, the stuff that ends up on my desk, I take into account the guy's résumé, how much credit does he have, debts has he got. It factors in there.

The easiest one to cite would be the quarterbacks we've had leave here. Every guy, I wished them well. They've all done well, which is great. Ryan Boyle got a six-year, which is great. Have a chance to go back and play one more year after a tough injury.

All the quarterbacks that left have done well. I understood fully why they wanted to leave. I supported it. In the meantime they did a great job here, which is a real credit to those guys.

That one is open for interpretation. Certainly if it's in the player's best interest, no different than the NFL choice players have to make, it centers on what's best for that individual.

Q. You have had a jagged bowl practice, prep. You generally get a player or two who is a freshman that takes that step, Maybe we want to play him in a bowl game. Have you had anybody yet?

KIRK FERENTZ: Haven't seen it yet. Haven't done enough work. Again, I don't know. Friday night we're

getting into our opponent. I don't know how much we'll get into that. Have to do it on the scout team.

Q. It's your first year with the screwed-up recruiting thing with Jay. How did that work for you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Good. I think so far everything has gone well. You're not going to replace Reese. Everywhere I go, you hear that. I was in state a lot last week, the day before that, the week before that. You get that feedback. It's just unbelievable what he does, the ground he covers.

Everybody has done a really good job. I think we've transitioned well. I think we're doing good.

Q. (Question about the Holiday Bowl gifts.)

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know what they are. They did a gift suite. I don't know how they compare to other bowls. We don't get to do the gift suite thing. I don't know what I would do with another lounge chair on the Rose Bowl.

Our players seemed happy about it. I don't know much about it, quite frankly. I just know this, there's no downside to it. I know the Holiday Bowl is a first class bowl. I imagine our guys are getting a good deal.

One of the articles I always give them, South Carolina player, whatever year it would be, talked about how excited he was to go to a bowl, get gifts. It was everything but the game.

I think our guys really enjoy it and appreciate it. I haven't heard any negative feedback at all.

Did that answer the question?

Q. Yes.

KIRK FERENTZ: Thank you.