

## **Kirk Ferentz Post-Practice Media Transcript (Outback Bowl – 12/27/18)**

### **Coach, good to be down in Tampa again?**

It is. It is always good. Nice weather, this is a great setup. The players are excited. Seventy of our guys haven't been here actually, so it's a new experience for them. You think about being here a week as opposed to a couple days in New York, so for all those guys, it's a new experience in general.

### **Have you sensed a little more pep in the step of guys like Brandon Smith who is playing against Mississippi State and Mekhi Sargent?**

I don't know if anything different, although Brandon has been continually improving, as has Mekhi. Both of those guys have improved during the course of the season, almost week-to-week. That has been good. I'm sure Brandon has a little special interest in this whole thing, hopefully that doesn't get him distracted.

### **How do you approach not having Noah (Fant) here. How have you guys discussed a change in the game plan?**

It's no different than if a player is injured. You look at what you think you are going to have going into a game and you never know until you get to the game. Then try to balance things out. We'll change our personnel groups a little bit, certainly. The percentages will change, but we will still have two tight ends on the field, that won't come out of our playbook, but it might alter our percentages a little bit.

We have other good players, too. The receivers are doing a good job, so if we're out there in a three-wide receiver set, we feel good about those guys and just try to be smart about what we plan.

### **Did any of your guys get back the NFL stuff yet?**

Yeah, they all got it probably a week ago or something like that. Like I said last week, we're just thinking about the game right now, Mississippi State. I don't expect anybody to make an announcement either way during the next couple days. It's about the game.

### **How is backup quarterback shaping up? You have had a whole month to look at both of them.**

It's interesting, both guys are doing some good things. Both have grown immensely since last January and that's a positive. They are both coming along. Hopefully we won't have to make a choice, the best-case scenario would be to let Nate (Stanley) play the entire game and then we'll let the guys continue to compete when we get around to spring.

### **Does it look like your staff is going to stay together?**

I haven't heard anything to the contrary unless you guys know something I don't know.

### **Has (Tyler) Linderbaum solidified himself on the other side of the ball?**

He has done a nice job. He has transitioned pretty well. A lot of times it's a real tough transition for a guy to go from defense to offense. He has a little feel and knack for it. He has to learn a lot of finer points now, but he is getting a lot of work and I think he is enjoying it.

**Is it realistic he could play center in this game?**

I'm not counting on that. Cole (Banwart) is still our No. 2 guy and that was our intention all along. But Keegan (Render) is going to graduate and we weren't sure who the No. 1 and No. 2 were going to be next year. I think it has been a good move. It seems he is enjoying it and Keegan has been great helping him with it a little bit, too, as has Cole.

**It seems to have weakened the defensive tackle position where you guys kind of need bodies right now.**

That is the downside. You move one guy and you give up something. I'm not sure it affects us on the short term; we have however many months to get that shored up. That's the way we looked at it.

**What does it look like in terms of reserves at defensive tackle right now?**

Same guys we have had. Tyler didn't really play very much, so it's not a big deal there. You have (Cedrick) Lattimore, (Brady) Reiff, and Chauncey (Golston) who can move in there. He has played well inside, too. The cupboard is not bare right now. I think we have six guys we feel really good about putting into the game and then seven and eight as well.

**What about Daviyon Nixon this year? What can you say about his development?**

Everything about him has been very positive We'll keep our fingers crossed and hope everything is good when we get going in January.

**Lattimore looked like he was in street clothes. Is he OK to go for the game?**

He has a little soft tissue stuff. We hope to have him out tomorrow. He is supposed to be, he was moving around pretty well today.

**What about freshmen? You have a bunch of guys with three games.**

They are not an integral part of it, but they will play. Some potentially, D.J. Johnson certainly will. Tyrone (Tracy, Jr.) has a chance to get some snaps and do some things. We don't have to hold anybody back right now, that's a good thing. Everything has been cleaned up that way.

**This is your sixth Outback Bowl. Is going to the same bowl seemingly every year -- I'm just joking about that -- is that a good problem to have?**

If you think about it, that really only affects the coaches. As I mentioned, we have 70 guys on this trip who have never been here. For them, it's totally new and the way I put it and as I told our guys this, we're fortunate in that we have earned the bowl trip, we're fortunate we're in a great venue for a bowl and that is one thing we know from experience. The guys who have been here before, there is no bowl

fatigue for them. For the 70 other guys, this is all a new experience for them and I mentioned earlier, too, we were on a condensed trip last year, so this is the first time a lot of those guys have been on a real extended, week-long bowl trip.

**I asked Brian (Ferentz) if he is wistful at all. The Outback Bowl was his last game in college. He says he remembers the 2001 Alamo Bowl better because they won. Is that really what matters on these trips?**

It sure helps. I have been to a lot of bowls in my career and the ones we win are more favorable in your memory for sure. There is nothing bad about winning.

**You have talked about facing the 2013 LSU team having so many talented players. Does this Mississippi State team remind you of them?**

Especially on the defensive side of the ball. They have some really talented guys. They play well collectively. You look at their stats and it's been steady. Not many teams have run the ball well on them. They do a good job of taking that away and they get you in third-and-longs. Their third down defense and offense percentages are both pretty healthy and they're good in the red zone on both sides.

**What do you see as the main issue on offense the last two times here; not many points?**

The thing that stands out to me, two years ago, was we had a couple critical plays that we couldn't make. I think if we make those it was a whole different game. I think the score is totally unrepresentative of the game, but we didn't make the critical plays and Florida did, so we lose. It got out of hand or whatever at the end of the game and it wasn't very pretty. And then 2013, that was ancient history, I can't even remember who was playing quarterback that year.

**Is a bowl game win more to cap off the current season or is it a carryover into the offseason?**

It's what you make of it. If you lose maybe it motivates you more for the next season. Right now, we are just worried about this season. Mostly you want the seniors, in a perfect world, to leave with a great memory and I know Mississippi State wants the same thing. You'd love the seniors' last moment of college experience to be a bowl win. To be in a bowl game is a special treat itself.

**With T.J. being on the only player on the tight end roster who has played considerable minutes with Noah Fant gone, how have you seen him mature this month as a leader mentoring the guys?**

He has really been that way all year. You would think he is a senior in a lot of ways. He went through the learning stages last year, if you will, not that he's not still learning but last year was his first year playing. Usually the second year guys are a lot more confident. I think Nate Wieting has done a good job, too. He made a big play in the bowl game last year. Hopefully he will be ready to go and help us out as well.

**Are the wide receivers ready for more percentage of balls going their way? Kelton (Copeland) said it is a short rotation because he wants Ihmir and Brandon. Is this group ready for that?**

I think Nick Easley is one of our best offensive players. Compared to a year ago, we are so much further down the road. We have some other guys coming in behind them who are doing a good job, too. They'll be fine. Mississippi State has good man coverage with good defensive backs, it's going to be a challenge for us. The whole thing is going to be able to protect and give our guys a chance to do what they have to do.

**Are you always going to be on the lookout for a Nick Easley type player now?**

He is kind of a typical "Iowa" guy if you will, you know, 'where did he come from'. It's interesting to me if you look at the last two years whether it was Nick, who we called two years ago in December, or Mekhi who both you could argue are two of our better players. Both are unconventional as far as when they got here and all that. So we will keep looking over to the west a little bit.

**We talked a little about that with Brian (Ferentz), all the different ways that you can get kids now. He doesn't think that's healthy, I would imagine you agree a little bit, but here you guys are picking up a Mekhi and Butler from Nevada. You are doing different things to get guys. Are your eyes open to that now?**

I think it would be foolish not to consider everything if it gives you a chance to help your football team you have to consider that. It's a little like online shopping. I can pick stuff out online, but my daughter or someone has to punch all the stuff in and then it comes in the box and it's not quite what you thought it was. We've all experienced that. You don't want to be just doing that. But we had researched Mekhi pretty well. You don't just want to take someone off the internet, I guess that's probably also true with dating, right? I've never tried it.