

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, November 14, 2017

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. In regards to the Kinnick Edge project, we're all excited about that. The last couple home games last year were about as good as it gets, and this year it's been the same way. To think it could be louder and even more spectacular down there on the field is really exciting for everybody involved in our program. We're really excited about that whole program.

Before we get to the game this coming week, a little bit about last weekend. The biggest thing is I told the team right after the game, and the same thing on Sunday, is learn from that, and then we've got to move on.

I think as a team we certainly showed really good potential in all three phases a couple weeks ago in Kinnick, and then it wasn't quite the same this past Saturday, up in a tough environment against a really good football team that was playing at a high level, and we certainly came up short. The big thing we need to do is get over the tape, look through that, see what adjustments we can make, what kind of improvement we can make this week, and then push forward, and that's really like every week. It's a 12-week season, and that's the routine week in and week out.

That's kind of where we're at right now. So far we're off to a good start, so that's a positive.

Certainly as you turn your eyes toward this week, first thing to mention is it's senior day, and that's always a really special thing for everybody involved, and we've got a great senior class. These guys have been outstanding to work with over the period of four or five years, with the exception of a guy like James Butler, who was a great addition for our football team this year, and it's certainly an emotional day for the players and their families and everybody involved. It's always very, very special. It's always great for the fans to turn out and show their appreciation, and we certainly appreciate that support for these guys and all that they've done for the university, not just the football team but the entire university during their time.

You think about the seniors, every year you've got a lot of guys that are very well-known, that have played a lot of football, veteran players that have added a lot and really -- the fans are pretty familiar with, and you have

other guys that are stories that aren't as known, a guy like Dan Gaffey, who really hasn't hit the field in a meaningful snap; Jake Hulett hasn't played an awful lot, but those guys have been in the program, worked every bit as hard as everybody else, and they do a great job day in and day out. The thing about a guy like Gaffey, who just works so hard on the scout team and just not only gives our offense a good look, but he also helps provide leadership with those guys.

Everybody on the team has a valuable role, and certainly those guys are illustrative of that, and then the other story you have to look at, you think about guys that are injured, and walked out to the field today right behind Ike and Boone. You think about two fifth-year seniors that have played a lot of really good football here, quality football and been great leaders and great team members, and unfortunately they haven't been able to play over the last several weeks and won't play this week, obviously.

Again, every class has a lot of stories. There's a story with every player, and those are the things that are tough for everybody, and I say it every year, but speaking on behalf of our entire staff, nothing but great admiration for any player that goes through the program, graduates from the university and does a great job representing our program and the athletic department.

Our hats are off to them, and it'll be great to honor them on Saturday and then we'll finish the rest of that at the banquet certainly.

Turning our attention to Purdue, Coach Brohm has done an outstanding job there. You guys have all figured that out. They're a really good football team right now. They're playing with a lot of energy, a lot of passion, and playing really good football right now. They're moving the ball well. That really comes as no surprise with his offensive background, his expertise. Defensively it's equally as impressive to me, and they have not been strong defensively over the last couple years, but they're playing really well on defense right now, and I think just overall if you look at it collectively, the thing that impresses me, especially since their off week, they've played really good football. They've played Wisconsin closer than anybody in Madison thus far. They gave them the best game and played them

the most competitively in Madison.

But if you look at it, the losses they've had, one-point, two-point, the Wisconsin game was a one-score game, and the other night Northwestern hit a punt return on them that widened the margin a little bit, but they've really done a good job defensively and it's tough to score on them.

You combine those two things, statistically they're doing very well, and they're a tough, tough football team. They're playing for a bowl opportunity, so we know we have our hands full when they come to Kinnick on Saturday.

It's all about us trying to correct as many mistakes as we can correct, execute at a higher level, because quite frankly we're not good enough to overcome, we can't erase the mistakes that take place out there.

Our focus has to be on being more consistent, better execution, and playing at a high level, and that's really what it gets down to.

Our captains this week: Josey Jewell, Nate Bazata, Nate Stanley, and Kevin Ward. And then the only injury update I really have, Amani Hooker has not practiced yet, so that thing hasn't moved as well as we had hoped, so we'll see. He has a chance to play, but he hasn't done much now in whatever it is, eight, nine days, so I think the likelihood of that is dropping off a little bit.

Q. When you look at Purdue, they're giving up half as many points as they did last year from 38 to 19, they have 35 rushing touchdowns, they're at nine now, yards per carry cut. We know Jeff Brohm's offensive guru status, but what are they doing so well defensively?

KIRK FERENTZ: To me that is the biggest story when you look at them and look at the improvement that they've made. They do catch your eye offensively. They move the ball really well. They're wide open, very creative, and you know, you've got to defend a million things when you play against these guys based on what we've seen, and I'm sure there's more to come. That's 10 weeks' exposure.

To me the real story is their defensive improvement because they haven't been good enough on defense to win consistently and they're playing really at a high level right now, but most important status is points given up, and they're not giving up a lot, so they're doing really well there. Their rush defense is much, much better, much improved. And I think the biggest thing is their whole team is multiple. You look at them offensively, defensively and special teams wise, you

have to prepare for a lot of things. They're very diverse. You're not sure what you're going to get your week, but they're very, very diverse that way.

The thing I'm impressed with is just the tempo they play with, the aggressiveness, and they're a fundamentally sound team defensively. To not give up points, you have to be, and it's very impressive.

Q. Has there been an attitude difference that you can tell with them?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're playing hard every week, and it's start to finish. That's what it takes to win. That's what it takes to be successful. They've come up short a couple times, two points, one point to start there, but the Wisconsin game, up until Wisconsin's last possession, it was anybody's game to win there, and they're very opportunistic in that game coming up with turnovers, takeaways in their case.

But that's the biggest thing is they're playing with a real aggressive attitude, and you can tell they believe in each other, and that's a big part of being successful.

Q. Five years ago what made you offer Akrum, and how do you describe the player he's turned into?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, the story behind that one is it's Frank Verducci Sr., who was a longtime coach at Barringer High School out in Newark, Andre Tippett's high school coach. I think there were three captains at least in the early '80s that played for Coach Verducci out there. Bernie Wyatt and he had a good relationship, and I've gotten to know Coach Verducci over the years.

So anyway, he called -- he's retired from coaching, but he was mentoring in that school and called and just thought Akrum was a prospect that was being overlooked. I think at that time his only offer was Temple, so we looked at his film, really liked it, went out and met him and was really impressed with him, and I met his mom, a tremendous lady, and Coach Logan out there. So everybody was just very, very positive about him, and we ended up offering him, and it's really worked out well. He's had a tremendous career, and it would be great to see him finish on a strong note.

Q. Regarding the fifth-year seniors, under-recruited guys, any good stories about how they've matured as a class?

KIRK FERENTZ: Every year it's always interesting. I think that's one of the neat things about coaching is watching the growth and development. The two guys I mentioned, Ike and Boone, Ike the first time we met him was a high school quarterback I think coming out of his 10th grade year. We liked him as a football player, had no idea what he would become, and what a

good story there. And then Boone was a guy that walked on and turned down a full scholarship at an FCS school to come here. He kind of believed in us, and we certainly believed in him. Yet there wasn't enough maybe to document us or at least give us the confidence to offer him a full at that point, but everything about him we really liked, and it all came to fruition. He's got a great attitude, great work ethic, and he gave me a hug after the Ohio State game. I didn't realize how big he is. It's like getting hugged by a bear.

It's tough that those guys aren't able to play right now and contribute, but the development and growth that they went through and the success and the things -- all the good times they've had during their years, and if there's a happy ending to this, at least both those guys have been parts of a lot of good moments during their career, and they were right there with the guys during the good, highs and lows this year, as well.

Ben Neimann, kind of a different recruiting story, too, and boy, he's just quietly played so well for us, so steady and so well.

All these guys collectively, you just appreciate what they've done, all they've done to not only play well but also advance the entire team and be part of the team and lead the team.

Q. Your three senior linebackers between the three of them had two Power Five offers, both from you. What does that say about these guys that they were able to come here and be multiyear starters and play at the level they have?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's kind of interesting, you look at our team, you talk about Akrum, you talk about the linebackers, you go right down the list. There really aren't many guys that we went head-to-head with a lot of folks on, VandeBerg, the senior guys especially.

And I've said many times, we almost blew the Josey Jewell deal. It's still hard to believe.

That's the thing about evaluation that's so -- there's so many things that go into it and so many things you don't know sometimes you hope you know, you'd like to think you know but you really don't know.

That's what makes it interesting. That's what makes it unique, and I think the moral of the story is whether it's football or anything, pretty much people when given an opportunity they can do anything if they really set their mind to it and they're totally committed. You talk about those linebackers, that's the story of all three of those guys; they're all very serious about what they do, totally committed not only for themselves but the entire team for all the right reasons. Just the growth and the things that they've done, it's a credit to them, and it's true of

every one of these guys. We recruit prospects, but what they choose to do with the opportunity is really -- that's the story, and the effort they put in and the commitment and all the things they give up to be good at what they choose to do.

Q. Ike gave up a scholarship at Northern Iowa to walk on here --

KIRK FERENTZ: He and Boone are the same way. It was a leap of faith for them. We tried to let them know that we were really sincere, we really sincerely thought they had opportunity here. Bud credit is on their end because they believed in it and they believed in themselves more importantly and then came here and took advantage of the opportunity.

Q. Honestly were you the last one that needed to be convinced on Josey? Were you the no?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I was yes or no. Ultimately I say yes or no on everything pretty much. But, I've listened and learned to listen to Reese, as subtle as he is. But if he says it -- and Brett Greenwood was the first guy, like he kind of just kept saying, Brett Greenwood -- so what I learned there is if he says it a couple times, there's something that he knows that I don't know. And my feeling about Josey was at the end of the day, if nothing else, he'd play fullback. He'd make our team -- kind of like Bob Sanders, he'd make our team tougher and make us better that way. And if nothing else, where is the catchall position? Fullback. Where do all linebackers go if they can't play linebacker? They end up at fullback. That's kind of the way it is.

Q. Along those lines, you have Drake Kulick, who was a linebacker who moved to the other side of the ball; he's roommates with all those guys. What about his progression at that position, and then coming back from that horrific injury, and is the energy that he has before games --

KIRK FERENTZ: Drake and Brady, again, linebacker rejects end up as fullbacks, kind of like Cox and Plewa, the best tandem we've had, and now these two guys are a great tandem, too. But Drake is a senior. You mentioned the injury; what a terrible thing to go through, and I think about that, and I lump him with Scherff on that, too, same similar type deal. But the way he came back from that, and I mean, it was hard for him. It was hard for him all summer long.

At some point you wonder why a guy doesn't just say, hey, pitch it, I can get out of here right now and feel good about things.

That's the way he is. He wants to be part of this football team, and I can share this with you: this was a long road that he climbed because three, four years ago it wasn't real pretty when he tried to do what

fullbacks are supposed to do, and I don't mind telling you I was more than skeptical that he would be able to make it to where he made it, but he's done a great job.

Again, it's just hard work. He's invested a lot. He just kept coming back, kept getting better, and has added a lot to our football team.

Q. When you look at the energy before the game, he's the one who everybody kind of rallies, gets everybody energized. That has to be organic.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he's a little off center, which it helps if you're a fullback. There's no question that's a good thing.

Q. How do you generally gauge how much and how badly you miss two, three seniors starting offensive tackles and what that did to your offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: We just played a team that's pretty mature physically, and there's something to be said for maturity. We talk about experience, experience and maturity kind of go hand in hand, and if guys are doing things right, they get better with every year, every step of the program. That's what they should be doing.

You know, you just can't diminish that, the importance of that, yet you can't dwell on it, either. It is what it is, and you push forward. To that point, we're in November now, so we all know what we're doing now, it's not August or September and we should be further down the road. Now the key is just to get consistency in our performance. That's a big key.

Q. They've been in on it and helping it sounds like?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they have, and Snyder is the master of that. Nobody is coaching harder than Snyder these past couple months, including our staff. The guy just is totally invested. It's emblematic of the guys we have in our football program typically. They're not selfish guys. They just really care about what they do, and then when they're not able to do it, they try to share the wealth a little bit and the experience, and to me that's being a great teammate, and that's what we ask our guys to do.

Yeah, you hate to see guys get hurt, but that's one thing, a benefit, I guess, if you will, and I think they get something out of it, too, some satisfaction and frustration at times.

Q. Going back to Josey, how valuable is he for this team when you look at how he plays and how he leads?

KIRK FERENTZ: The one fact I can give you that to me says it all, he will be our first three-time captain, and we've never had that. It's not like he campaigned for it.

That was Josey being Josey. There's nothing about him that's rah-rah or look at me, that type of stuff. But it just goes back to when he came here as a freshman and was getting beat up on the scout team by Van Sloten, just the way he operated. There's a seriousness to him, a focus and a hardness that really helps guys become a better football player, and it was there for him -- you could see it in him, but he certainly learned how to play the position. It's pretty intricate what he does. But the fact that he got voted as a captain as a sophomore I think speaks volumes, and that's everybody on the team voting, so it's just -- nothing has really changed. He's just kind of accelerated with every opportunity.

So yeah, you can't put it into words. He's a really good football player and a guy that gives everything he's got to the team.

Q. Can you put a finger on kind of the inconsistency of the offense? Is it just simply because you've got young players at young spots, some are making plays one week, some are dropping passes the next, or is there anything closer you can --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I hope it is, and I hope this isn't the week we're in that mode.

But yeah, on offense especially, little things kill you, mistakes kill you. It's hard to -- unless you're good enough just to throw it up and somebody run down there and catch the ball, 70 yards down the field. Or a guy that can just hit a run, nobody blocks him, boom. I'm going back to whatever it was, 1976 sitting in Three Rivers Stadium, Dorsett hit one for about 80 yards or 90 yards on the first play of the second half against Penn State, and game was over. That was it. That's about all he got, but that's all he needed. But he's a Hall of Fame player, too.

So it's a matter of trying to sustain drives, put things together, move. Everybody has got to be working together, and when you do that with cohesion and good execution, clean football, however you want to put it, you give yourselves a chance. When you get five-yard penalties or penalties that'll set you back, false starts, what have you, missed assignments, all those things really disrupt things. So offense is a little bit more intricate. A guy can blow something on defense, and if he's not at the point of attack nobody may ever know, but pretty much everybody on offense impacts each other. That's a challenge, and we've shown that we're capable, and now I think the big challenge is can we show consistency.

Q. Punt returner this week, is that up in the air?

KIRK FERENTZ: Definitely, yeah.

Q. What's going on there?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, part of it -- Matt missed a little practice time a week ago, so that doesn't make the challenge any easier for him. There's a real art to that, too, but it helps to be out there every day and get the practice and all that kind of stuff. We'll play it by ear right now.

Q. Does Max Cooper have a chance then?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, he definitely is in the equation.

Q. Through kind of the competitive phase of the game, probably three quarters the other day, you guys had 2nd and 6 or closer nine different times out of like 15 opportunities, and when you were able to run the ball on 2nd and 6 and closer, you had really good consistency, but then when you passed the ball, that's where you had some issues. Was there an over-thinking a little bit on 2nd and closer? What was kind of the reasoning behind it?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we never established any rhythm, and part of our deal, we play better when we're balanced typically, and they're a really good 3rd down team. They're a good defensive team, period. To me that is -- as good a football team as they are, that is the strength of their team. We weren't up for the challenge, and I think we just kind of -- pretty much the same thing we did the week before. We executed a little bit better the week before against a good football team, and it wasn't there for us Saturday. We'll just kind of continually reexamine what we do and try to put a plan together that we think fits the opponent that we're playing.

Q. Have you seen the growth you needed or wanted to see at this point -- I think your receivers have gone above and beyond, but have they maybe kind of hit a wall?

KIRK FERENTZ: I hope they haven't hit a wall. We've still got two games, and we're hoping we're in a trend. We took a step backwards, there's no doubt about that, and part of that was us, part of that was the competition. But I'm not sitting here making any excuses. We played good competition the week before, too, but we didn't have it on Saturday. It was obvious, and it was a team thing. It wasn't just one position.

I think that group has grown. I think we're making improvement, and as a coach I think we all look at it and say we can continue to grow, and that's really our challenge this week and will be our challenge next week. So we're down to whatever it is, 10, 11 days left in the season, and that's where our focus is right now, how much can we improve here in the next four days and then the next block of days after that.

Q. How are they without David Blough, who's kind of like a Kirk Cousins or Nate Sudfeld in leadership style and ability?

KIRK FERENTZ: He was really impressive up at the luncheon. I mean, he spoke on behalf of the athletes, and boy, whoever they put up there, those guys are just so representative of the kind of guys we work with, so it's really neat. I don't want to speak for them. I'm sure they'd feel better having him out there, as well, but this guy is really throwing the ball well. He runs it better than you might think he can, so he can run it and throw it, and they throw it all over the place. We had a chance to -- we were watching it on the bus coming home from the game the other night, and he threw for a lot of yards, really effective pass, and again, they do a lot of things that are tough to prepare for because they're very, very diverse. Not afraid to pull something out of their hat, too, at any time, so you've just got to be on edge at all times.

Q. Do you go into games thinking and knowing that play action is going to be emphasized more, or does that play out during the course of the game based on what the defense is doing?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's always part of our plan. That's how we're wired and built. But the game, the way it goes really dictates how you start calling things. The other night we didn't settle into anything that really felt good, looked good, that type of thing. It's a lot more fun, you get a little rhythm, and if he can start with a good run game that always helps. But you kind of have to go in and then adjust as you go along.