

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



COACH FERENTZ: Good afternoon. So before I talk about this week's game, just go backwards here for a few minutes and just first thing, anytime we lose a football game, disappointing loss.

The point I always make to the team is it's shared ownership. We all have ownership in it. Players, coaches, everybody alike.

So that's really the way it goes. And a couple of things we've known since summer and really forever, for us to be successful, our veterans have to play their best football.

And certainly the newcomers have to step up and do their absolute best and learn as we go along.

As coaches, we have to put our players in good position to win. And that's really how the whole formula works. So that's looking backwards. And as you look forward we have two ball games left. That's where we're at right now as a football team.

So obviously what we have to do is get our veterans to lead us, get our younger guys to continue to improve and then we've got to give them a plan that gives them a chance to go out and have success on the field.

So the last point I'll make just on that is November, talk about November football forever, I think it's a very important month in college football. And our goal right now is to finish the month the way we started it, and that's on a positive note.

So that's really where we're at. When you look forward to this weekend's game against Nebraska. Couple things that make it special. First it's marquee-type football playing on Black Friday. Something we've started, it's been five, six years ago. I think that's really unique.

It's been exciting for us to be part of that, and the Heroe Trophy, the concept behind it is absolutely fantastic. And it's a special game. All trophy games are important to us. Always have been. And we've got a chance to go out and try to claim another one. So that's important.

And then I think beyond that, it gives us a chance

hopefully to build our bowl resumé. Obviously the more you win, the better off you are. And equally important is to go into the bowl preparation part of the season on a positive note.

So those are all important things. And then certainly Nebraska has got a lot to play for also. They're a storied program in college football. They've got a lot of pride and we expect nothing but their best shot on Friday.

They've got a quarterback that's an extremely good thrower. He's been very, very productive throwing the football. Defensively, they present a little bit of a challenge for us with a 3-4 scheme.

On special teams they've got really good specialists, their punter and placekicker are excellent and they've got unbelievable return guys, both in the punt and kick phase.

So they're really a team that's got a lot of ability in all three phases, and we certainly have a challenge in front of us that way.

Our captains this week will be Josey Jewell and Nate Bazata on defense, and Sean Welsh and Kevin Ward will be the special teams captain.

The only thing, on injuries, it doesn't look like Amani Hooker, he still hasn't responded the way we had hoped. So I can't envision him playing. Still hasn't done much in practice at this point.

Q. The quarterback position is a heavily scrutinized position. What has impressed you about Nate this year, not only in his development but the way he battles up and down?

COACH FERENTZ: It's a very challenging position to play. Certainly in our offense it is and has been. And you hit it right on the head. I think probably the things I've been most impressed with just his response to when things aren't going well.

You go right back to the first ballgame where he hit a little turbulence and came back and made a beautiful throw. And he's really pretty much done that throughout the season. He's a high character quality guy. And I can say the same about Tyler right behind

him, both are just tremendous young people.

Work extremely hard and I think they're both very, very talented and each step along the way it's like our football team, he's gained a really valuable experience and I think he's done a lot of really good things thus far.

Q. This week in practice, are you confident you'll play better this week?

COACH FERENTZ: So far. We've had two good full days, a little different schedule, jump into it a little faster more in depth than a normal week. The pace is expedited a little bit, but we're assisted a little bit too because the guys aren't in school. We had a little bit more meeting time before practice yesterday and today.

At least to introduce the things instead of doing it on the fly. So it all balances out. And this time of year I don't think that's an issue. But the most important thing is, on the field, you know what they're doing, how they're moving around. I thought their spirits were good yesterday. I thought our execution was better today than yesterday. And that's a positive.

Q. What did Matt Hankins show you in that game?

COACH FERENTZ: It's not what he's shown in the game but what he's been doing since he got here. He's a guy that's come in and worked hard. He's got a good air about him, I guess, if you would. Not cocky, but he's a confident guy.

And he doesn't seem overwhelmed in any regard. So he's been doing well in practice. And we hit some bumps on Saturday. And just felt like we give him an opportunity to get in there and play.

Q. Were you surprised by that? You guys have not had a position or a series or a sequence like that where you rotate guys in after failure after failure?

COACH FERENTZ: Credit to them. They clearly had a plan in that third quarter. And they were persistent with it. We were looking for answers at that point.

Q. When things are degrading, not going well, how do you spend your 24 hours after a game?

COACH FERENTZ: After the game? You probably don't want to know. It's not very dramatic. What I'm doing is not very -- it's pretty nondescript. What I'm thinking you don't want to know. We all have dark moments. It's usually always the worst after anything doesn't go well.

And so, your mind goes all over the place. You think about a lot of different things, and you just try to sift through things and work on them a little bit and most important thing is when you come in on Sunday, you've

got to have your thoughts somewhat in order and that's part of the process during the course of the day, too.

But to think that you just shake it off and, hey, tomorrow is a new day, it's not quite that easy. There's a process you work through.

But hopefully by Monday you're where you need to be and have at least a semi-clear vision of where you want to take things.

Q. You've had really good punters in the past, given your defense an extra first down to work with. Where do things stand now with punters. Is Ryan Gersonde going to punt, or is he hurt, or is there a reason he's not playing?

COACH FERENTZ: Both guys have had their ups and downs. And it will fall on the team just like we have. We haven't had the kind of consistency in that department that you would like to have. And we had Ron Coluzzi last year. But I was reminded, watching the Wisconsin game from a year ago, how inconsistent he was in that ballgame.

So that's part of the specialist life, unfortunately, and so we're just going to try to work through it. But right now neither guy has taken charge of it. So we're just going to kind of go back and forth here and see what takes place.

Q. Nebraska has given up a lot of yards on the ground lately. I think 900 the last three weeks. Is this the week where maybe the work being put in that running back room maybe gets rewarded?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see. And it's a team thing also. Just like the passing game. Everybody's got to execute for us to have a good opportunity to run the football. And that's the backs, the tight ends, obviously the linemen and the receivers are part of that, at least on big plays. Typically if they're getting in there doing a good job, that gives you a chance to break something loose.

You've watched us. Nothing's been easy for us we haven't done anything consistently as well. But that's the goal. But to execute it and go out and do it on Friday. We can talk about it right now, and we're planning, just like we do every week, we want to be balanced. And that will be our plan to go into Friday's game as well. But really the key is getting out there and executing it, doing a better job at that.

Q. When you go up against eight, nine, maybe 10 guys in the box is one play called and run into a brick wall or can something be done differently?

COACH FERENTZ: Every situation is a little different. There are some situations where we have run/pass

flexibility.

There are others where we're going to run the play regardless. Just depends on the situation. So every play is a little bit different. And hopefully we're getting into good run plays trying to avoid dead plays. We've always tried to do that. Run or pass, try to get out of a dead play. Sometimes it has to do with protections or the look that you're getting, the overloading. But there are some situations where you run it and go with it.

Q. Is it disturbing to see the zone running game not work after you guys have drilled it, or we talk about, think about, places where you missed your key tackles, is this something that comes along with time?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, hopefully it will come along. You're hopeful it comes along quicker. Clearly -- I'm losing track of my days now -- but fairly recently I walked behind Ike, I maybe said that the other day, Ike and Boon, going out to the field, kind of the realization at that point, two guys that are fifth-year seniors, pretty mature guys that have played.

It makes a difference. But that being said, we're 11 games into it right now. So the idea is to be moving forward and that's why November football is important, what kind of progress you make, and how you're growing, how you're pushing forward.

So we have another opportunity, there's one more game left in November. And that's the goal this week is to take a step and hopefully look a little bit more cohesive and look a little bit more together up there with all the schemes we're running.

For protections, there's some things, I'll interject that, that haven't been as smooth as they need to be up front there, too. So just getting everybody on the same page and taking on the challenges in front of us.

Q. You talked about cohesiveness and it takes time for that, and you said week 11, when those plays are taken away in the zone, when those plays are taken away, what do you reach for?

COACH FERENTZ: We do what we do. So it's going to be run or pass. But the biggest thing is just trying to avoid the things that stop you and stop drives. Whether it's five-yard penalties. Right now for us, that's a challenge, hurdle, if we get a five-yarder.

Major penalties are certainly a challenge and dropped balls, all the little things that don't seem that big but they take you off course.

And the other night we had a couple of really good drives, long drives, 10-plus plays, but when you have to

drive the football, then the precision that you need, the margin for error goes down a little bit. It's not like we're hitting a lot of big plays right now. When you get those, that helps the cause a little bit too.

But those will come in time if we're driving the ball a little bit better and executing.

Q. In all of your years of coaching, how hard is it or how often do players practice better than they play or does it happen the other way?

COACH FERENTZ: Happens more the previous way. The practice one, don't perform quite the way you want to, that happens.

When you don't practice well, it's rare to play well. It's really rare. It might happen with a veteran team, veteran player, but for the most part your best part is to prepare in practice and do it with consistency.

But even then there's still a process that's different in the stadium, different on game day. And a lot of variables. So you just keep pressing, keep pushing and hope that this is going to be maybe the week that we take a big step, and that's what we're pushing for.

Q. Like the Chuck Hartlieb, the story, how he didn't practice well until he got out the field, that's just really unusual, stuff like that?

COACH FERENTZ: When they needed it in practice -- but the other guys looked better in practice. One of them was a first-round quarterback. He was a pretty good player. Tom Poholsky was a really good player, too. Doesn't always become clear.

And bring that up right now, like Nick Easley, the best thing he's done since he got here was play that first ballgame. He looked fine in August. He's doing a good job. He was okay in spring, but he was feeling his way at that point but the first ballgame he made plays we hadn't seen him make yet.

So sometimes that's part of the process. And it's kind of where we're at a little bit offensively right now. We haven't carried it over to the game field the way you need to on a consistent basis. We've done it at times.

Q. You've been blessed in the last handful of years having some really good punt returners, King, Micah Hyde. I don't remember you struggling with the punt return like you have this year. What's the issue there? Are you considering putting in someone else?

COACH FERENTZ: Two thoughts on that. We probably should have gotten to King there faster, took us a while to figure that out. Probably one of the better things we did probably, wished we'd done it sooner, in

retrospect. To that point it's almost like if you look at either end of the punting game, we're not consistent with our punting right now and fielding the punt, returning the punt, we're not doing that well enough either. We're open to that and considering that.

Q. You took redshirts off the three freshmen receivers. One has played a lot. The other two played very sparingly. Do you anticipate any upward mobility for those two over bowl prep to possibly for the bowl or -- maybe the reason for --
COACH FERENTZ: Two things. It's up to them, first of all, to move into the picture. And they're both doing a good job. The reason was really very clear. I think all of us recognized back in the spring we weren't where we needed to be in the passing game, especially at the receiver position.

So all three of the guys that we're talking about showed enough in August for us to believe that it would be a good investment to get them up and started and get them moving, working with the first or second offense for the entire season.

And that's kind of like Noah last year. Noah didn't play an awful lot, but came up with a big play in our last ballgame. But the idea was to move him along faster so maybe this year he could -- just looking at the whole group we felt those guys, that was our best move for them to get them moving a little quicker, knowing we may not see a big return on it this year but at least we're hopefully pushing forward into the future a little bit with those guys.

Q. Are the last two losses magnified even more because of the performance against Ohio State, where all of a sudden the expectations are right up here and the last two weeks haven't --
COACH FERENTZ: I think realistically I doubt anybody saw that, envisioned that kind of score. Now, we envisioned winning. The plan there is get it in the fourth quarter and find a way to win when you're that far down the underdog column.

But the way it worked out, and believe me nobody is complaining about that. But it was just a step, not a season. It's one game and you turn around and do it again next week. A challenge I think in football can be if this is what you're getting at how do you handle some success. And not only some success but that was over the top. Nobody saw that coming, I don't think anybody in the country saw it coming. They went through the same thing the week before. Probably affected them more than us. I don't know that. I'm not coaching their team. But sometimes those challenges are as tough as the other ones. And that's all part of a whole season. That's why it's so hard to predict what's going

to happen during the course of the season, as much as we like to, it's really hard to predict how things are going to affect the football team.

Q. Jackson is a finalist, Josey isn't?
COACH FERENTZ: I heard it literally five minutes before I came out. Steve gives me a tip what's going on out there. I had no idea about that. In all honesty I think there's a committee that selects it. I used to be -- I used to be on the Butkus one. I don't think I am now. Maybe that's what happened. I don't know. But there are a lot of really good football players out there in this country.

And I'm not sure who is in and who is not. But I'll say this, Josey is not only one of the best linebackers we've ever had here but one of the best football players we've had. And you guys have been watching him for the last four years. Just like we have. He's fun to watch play football. Tremendous player. We've had some good linebackers here. But this guy, for what he's done not only as a player leadership-wise, and I think the fact he'll be a three-time captain says pretty much the whole, states it all. He's the only one we're aware of, Steve went back to 1930. We haven't found anybody else that's done that.

So that really speaks to him. And it's like him. He doesn't talk about it. He just does it. And then with Josh, I think that's fantastic. I think he's one of three. Again I'm not sure how they pick these things, but I can't imagine, I don't know how many players that have had back-to-back weeks like he's experienced. That's really neat.

Probably the neatest thing about him is the fact, like Josey, he just came up the ranks, it wasn't like he was heralded coming in or anything like, but he's worked very hard every step of the way. It's neat to see him have the success.

Q. Early signing day, do you anticipate all your commits to sign, and if somebody chooses not to and waits until the second one, where does that put in your realm I guess over the next couple of months?
COACH FERENTZ: We're optimistic. We're hopeful. And the vibe we're getting is that will be what takes place. But you never know, recruiting as you well know is very, very unpredictable.

And to me it's really the first signing date, at least with the guys we have committed right now, prospects we have committed, seems like we've all had a really good mutual relationship and we're all on the same page. So if they choose not to sign in December, then that just tells us maybe that there's a little pause in their

thinking and in turn it will cause a pause in our thinking.

Q. What do you remember -- speaking of Reese, finding Nate Bazata. Nate said he was found under a rock, what can you remember of that?

COACH FERENTZ: Basically that's what it was. And Reese gets his eyes on guys. I don't know how many miles he puts on his car during the course of recruiting season. But he gets his eyes on guys and he's got a real knack of, whether it's at a track meet, wrestling, whatever, he just sees things in players and athletes that maybe other people don't see as clearly.

And his track record has been really good. It's not 100 percent. Nobody is. But it's pretty close. So Nate was one of those guys that just really impressed him and when we got to know -- he walks in, it's not wow. He's not 6'4", 6'5", one of those guys. But it's like he's not Josey but he's like Josey, there's just this sense that kind of he gets across, he just permeates it. This guy is like really serious about what he does.

And to perform as well as he did in high school and all the things he did, you've got to be serious and that's exactly what he's been every day he's been here, just a hard-working tough-minded guy. Fought through injuries, unfortunately. And what have you. And he's an entrepreneur too.

I guess he gets cost of attendance money. I don't know how many -- I don't know what he's got. Cows or horses but he buys animals. I guess they're cows and has his dad working for him. This guy is no dummy. He's got a little enterprise going while he's going to school here. Pretty good deal. He's sharp. Josey is pretty sharp, too, that way.

Q. Akrum said when he's done he wants to get into politics, would love to be the mayor of a town some day. Does he ever talk to you about that and what kind of politician?

COACH FERENTZ: He hasn't. That's probably better than coaching, but that's probably a coin toss. Bad jobs: Politics or coaching.

Q. Coaching?

COACH FERENTZ: I could see that. But politics. Wow.

Q. You are doing everything you can in trying to win. Do you know last Saturday how much Kinnick emptied towards the end of the game? I hadn't seen that very often.

COACH FERENTZ: I was told afterwards. I don't know when the last time that would be. 2012, maybe against Purdue. Maybe. I don't know. But it was cold as could be. You probably noticed that. I did. It's probably 10

degrees, 15 degrees colder when you're losing. That's unusual but that's how it feels.

And we're out of the game. It wasn't looking good there the last couple of minutes, people left. I can certainly understand. To our point our crowds have been great all season long. It's really been good. I think about our last two games a year ago in there being about as good as they get. And this year, I got the headset on so I don't quite hear it.

But I heard people during the Ohio State game, Penn State game, they thought it was louder than any place they've ever been, the crowd noise. So we're really appreciative of that.

And pretty soon that thing is coming down over there and I don't know anything about the new project other than it's been well received, people have jumped on board. We're appreciative of that.

My only request is make it higher and louder and I think they've got it figured out. So we're really excited about what it's going to be like to be in there next year.