

BIG TEN CONFERENCE FOOTBALL MEDIA DAYS

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Kirk Ferentz

Chicago, Illinois

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Iowa's head coach Kirk Ferentz.

COACH FERENTZ: Good morning. Looking forward to getting back on the field with our team next Friday. Always anxious for that. So we're at that point. I think the team's had a really good summer thus far. They'll finish up this week, take a break, needed break, and then hopefully come in fresh to start the next phase of our preparation.

And thus far the 2018 team has been a really good group to work with. I think they've handled every phase of the program pretty well and certainly have the potential to be a good football team.

So really what's important now is finishing up this week in good fashion and then having a great preseason camp. Like any team, that's a really important thing.

Just looking backward for one second, we had some really rewarding moments last year, and probably the biggest thing I would note for this team moving forward, if we're going to take another step, it's all about consistency for us. So we've got to find a way to play with more consistency and see what we can do on that front.

Roster-wise, just if you look at the losses, the most obvious loss would be our linebacker corps. We had three seniors that played at a high clip, and we also had a fourth, Kevin Ward, a very valuable special teams player captain for us on special teams. We lost four players at that position that did a really good job. Nate Bazata was an unheralded defensive tackle, played well on our scheme, and Josh Jackson at the corner position. Defensively we have some work to do.

And on the offensive side, lost a couple of linemen, two running backs that were good players for us and a receiver.

So as we move forward right now, I think if you look at this ball club, we're a little bit more certainly veteran to the quarterback position, Nate Stanley, coming back for a second year. I think the surrounding cast as receivers and tight ends are a better more qualified group than a year ago. And then in the offensive line I think we have a chance with enough experience right now to have a good group there.

The obvious thing we're lacking is experience at running back. But we like our players there.

They just haven't played very much.

On defense, obviously, the big question is who is going to be our linebacker. Our linebackers will be our starting linebackers and depth behind them.

And then the secondary and the defensive line developing depth there as well. And the other big thing is our punting game was less than stellar last year. And if we're going to have a good football team, we have to take a step forward in that direction, too.

All in all, we've had good competition, healthy competition, I think, back in the spring. Expect that to be even better this August with guys that haven't played being a few months older and more experience and adding a bunch of freshmen on top of that.

Again, it's going to be good to quit talking about all this stuff and get back on the field and actually start working towards the '18 season. Questions.

Q. Nate Stanley, a year ago at this time, competing for a job, now becomes a second junior in your 20 years to be at Big Ten Media Days. What type of growth from him have you seen, and how did that happen?

COACH FERENTZ: I think that in itself and significant. He is a second underclassmen we brought up here, Josey Jewell being the other, and as far as we know, they're the only two juniors in the history of the program that have been selected captains after their sophomore seasons by their team. We have a lot of captains in December, it's a total team vote.

So I think that just tells you how far Nate came last year, from being a guy we weren't sure was going to start in August, at this time last year we didn't know who our starter was, and really had a good season. But most important, I think he's gained the respect and confidence of his teammates.

Great to have him back. He's worked extremely hard. And a few things you can't give players are experience and confidence, and I think he's been able to certainly benefit from a year of play, and looking forward to good things from him this fall.

Q. Kirk, you had an experienced center last year in James Daniels, who had rare athletic ability. How do you replicate what he can do, and do you have the type of player who can compete at that type of level?

COACH FERENTZ: Really, you don't replicate somebody like that. I mentioned yesterday through my entire career I've probably been around three centers that had his kind of ability, going back to Joel Hilgenberg in the early '80s, and coached a guy named Wally Williams in Baltimore, in Cleveland, that had some freakish abilities too.

When you get a player that has those kinds of abilities, it's really rare. The good news for

James is his best football is ahead of him. He's 20 years old right now, so he's got a great future. Tremendous athlete but more importantly a great young man and very intelligent.

Keegan has played really good football for us very quietly the last couple years. When he moved over full time this spring, he has played that position in the past, cross trained. He looked totally natural there.

What we won't have is a guy of James Daniels' athleticism. Probably have to go to the NFL to find that. Kind of rare. We've found in Keegan not only a good football player but also a guy respected in the program, very quiet leader, but very strong leader, and that's important I think at that position.

Q. A lot is being made about the disparity and strength between the two divisions. What are your thoughts on that, and is the West catching up with the East finally?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know about the race there, but, you know, I think the Big Ten, I've been in the league for quite a while now, 28, 29 years, something like that, it's always been a great conference. That's what I do know.

The consistency of what the league stands for, what it's all about, the quality of play, the quality of coaching, the competition, week in, week out, I think is really impressive.

There was a time I think in the '80s where there were a couple of programs typically at the bottom that really had a hard time competing. But it's interesting, you know, in my mind, at least, over the last 15, 20 years, it's been extremely competitive, and really I'm kind of focused on the 12 games on our schedule.

I don't see a game – we better be ready in each and every one of them. They're each going to be tough contests. That's the nature of college football right now. But I think it's accentuated in our conference. Anybody can beat anybody, so you better be ready each and every Saturday.

Q. You lost a couple of guys last year early to the NFL. Do you see that kind of taking off and the NFL maybe being more aggressive to underclassmen or that shifting to two years in college football?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's pretty much documented right now that's a trend that's rising. I think last year I think was the highest number, if I'm not mistaken, that entered into the draft. And unfortunately there are guys that enter that shouldn't enter.

Both of our players had good choices to make. And certainly wouldn't second-guess and supported both of their decisions. We've had other guys in the past, Brendan Sheriff (phonetic) and Desmond King, who decided to stay in for their senior years. That's a decision

an individual has to make, in my opinion, unless they're getting ready to make a bad decision. We haven't had that case.

It's kind of interesting, James Daniels' case, James is the kind of player we typically don't – we're not able to recruit. But fortunately his brother had a good experience at our place. I think our message resonated with him. He came in with uncommon skills and played at a very early age for us.

Josh, on the other side, is a pretty unique story in that he was not very highly recruited out of high school and started one game going into last year, ends up being a Consensus All-American and second round draft pick.

So when things like that happen, they're great success stories, and just I'm just happy for both those guys. They'll both do very well at their respective teams.

Q. What does Parker do that makes him successful, Parker Hesse? Sort of an undersized defensive end in this league. And what kind of example is he for the rest of your program?

COACH FERENTZ: First that comes to mind is his attitude. He caught our attention. He came to camp. He's from a smaller town in Iowa up north. And we liked him in camp, saw some things about him. He played quarterback and outside linebacker.

And then during our first bye week, two of our coaches went up and saw him compete live. They both came back and – I talked to them. They were on their way down in the car down that evening, Friday night, and they were very excited about what they saw. It's just competitive nature playing quarterback and then playing defense.

We're a team that tends to project. We look at guys that play maybe other positions. And if we think we find something in terms of their makeup and their competitiveness that we like, we'll recruit them and then figure out where they're going to play later on.

Parker grew into the defensive end position and really got thrown into action probably before he was ready. Jared had an injury, so he had to play a lot in that '15 season. And he was playing against pretty good players, Conklin in the title game from Michigan State.

But he competes hard. And that's another common denominator with him since he got on campus. Talking about guys we respect in our program, Parker certainly earned that. Everybody on our team thinks the world of him. He's a tremendous young person and outstanding student. Checks all the boxes. Players like that help you hopefully have a chance to put a good team together.

Q. Talk about Noah Fant. He's one of the best tight ends in the country. And

what do you expect from him this season?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, if we're going to have a good football team, our best guys have to play their best. That's been a common denominator throughout all the years. And certainly we consider him to be one of our best, and hopefully he'll be here next year at this time with us.

But I was hoping Josh and James will be here too. We'll see how that all plans out. But he's a tremendous young guy. We played him a little bit two years ago trying to get him acclimated a bit and get his feet wet.

And last year he had a tremendous season, really took steps, not only as a receiver, but in all areas of his game. And we've seen that continue to grow this past spring, the work he did blocking, his attitude is great. Certainly he's more comfortable and more adept at what he's doing now because he's got some experience behind him.

And just like everything about him. He's been a tremendous guy in our program. Again, if we're going to have a good season this year, we certainly need players like Noah to have a tremendous year. And I can't think of a reason why he won't, other than he's going to attract attention for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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