

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, April 17, 2018

Phil Parker



PHIL PARKER: First of all, thanks for coming. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you guys, and I know you take time out of your day to come here. I'm going on my 20th year season here, and it's always good to come here and talk to you guys and give you kind of a little bit of last comments about how the spring is going.

Before I open it up to any questions, I'd just like to sit here and talk about little things that we try to get accomplished during the spring, and one is the leadership. I always believe that if somebody is going to be a leader, and we'll do it by position, and to me, you have to do well on the field to take that leadership role, and I think that's very important.

And obviously we need them in other parts outside the football field. But with leadership, I think that's where it all starts: Where are you achieving on the field.

If I look at the defensive line, the leadership comes from Parker Hesse and Anthony Nelson. You look at the safeties with Jake Gervase and Amani Hooker. We expect a lot, and they've been doing a lot for us on the back end. And then obviously in the linebacker area, I think Amani Jones is doing a great job there at the Mike backer.

Going down to the strengths of our team, a strength is our defensive line. I think we have a lot of guys that can play defensive end, which allows us to be more flexible and maybe slide a couple guys inside. With the opportunity to put maybe Sam Brincks inside a little bit, Chauncey Golston, to put him inside has helped us out to be a more effective two-deep in the front, and I think it's been really good. They've been working there. We did it for two weeks with one and then we did two weeks with the other, and we'll probably switch them off going back and forth.

I think in the linebacker group, I think you look at Amani Hooker and Jack Hockaday, I think they've been doing a very good job of taking charge at the Mike position, and Welch and Aaron Mends at the Will. And Nick Neimann, and also I think a really good surprise, Barrington Wade has really done a tremendous job of increasing his knowledge and his ability to move around on the field.

The inside guys, the defensive linemen, I'd say Cedric has done a good job. He's improved. He's not there yet. And you look at Brady Reiff as another guy inside. But moving Sam and Chauncey in there a little bit has given us a little bit more depth across the board.

You go to the linebackers, obviously the challenge is we lost a trio of Josey Jewell, Bo Bower and Ben Niemann. Losing those three guys is a challenge. That's a job, and I think the growth that Amani and Aaron have been doing on the field, making plays, and the communication between them and their effort that they're giving is everything we're asking for them to do.

You talk about the defensive backs, Jake Gervase obviously has the most experience back there. He's been a vocal leader and I like his energy, and Amani Hooker has obviously played a lot of games back there, and you've got Geno Stone that played against Nebraska, and I thought he did a really great job during that game. We're really solid with those three guys.

And Brandon Snyder is definitely going to be coming back, and he's on schedule with his rehab, and we're really excited to see where he's going to be in the summer, and definitely next fall he's going to be a factor.

Q. At linebacker if you had a game Friday night instead of a scrimmage, who would be your two guys on the inside right now?

PHIL PARKER: I would say right now we'd start off with Amani Jones and Aaron Mends. I think they are two guys right now that we'd probably start off with. It varies every day. Sometimes one guy might be better than the other, but right now that's who I'd start.

Q. What has Amani done? He's built like a bowling ball or a tank, I guess, but what has he done to assure you that he can handle that responsibility?

PHIL PARKER: Commitment and the way he puts his effort and the time in, watching film, preparation, the energy and the excitement that he brings to the field, and then obviously when he finishes plays, I mean, he likes to go after guys, and he does a good job of tackling guys. We just like his enthusiasm.

Q. So it's Jack and Amani in the middle, and Christian and Aaron at Will?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, right now, yeah, that's the way we have it right now, and then obviously Ben and Barrington Wade outside.

Q. With Amani in the middle, what do you like about him in the middle?

PHIL PARKER: I think his ability to read the box and diagnose the plays, and when he goes, he goes. I think his ability to go ahead and trigger when he sees something, and when he comes, he's well-packed. He's got a low center of gravity, and he runs through guys. I'm really excited to see what he can do.

Q. Where is the communication in the back seven compared to where you want it to be going forward?

PHIL PARKER: Well, you know, we kind of keep track of guys, and the big thing for us is we never want to get beat with mental errors. If we get beat physically, that stuff happens. It happens every day, whether you're in high school or whether you're in college or pro football. But the biggest thing we don't want to do is get beat by mental errors. Since the beginning of practice, we've been tracking them to now. We've cut them down almost in half. Every day there's always a challenge of the way the offense is operating and how we're doing things that they're going to make us think a little bit, and our guys have to be on the same page.

So at the beginning of spring ball, you know, the changing and who's going to be in there, and now we're settling down on the guys that are in there, it's a lot better over the period of time of, what, 13 practices or 12 practices so far.

Q. Does it help with the defensive line right now, especially with Brandon being the most experienced, when they're making calls? They're obviously doing their line calls, but the back seven has got to do more --

PHIL PARKER: The backers have to do the most. They've got to do it up front and the back end. The good thing is we've got good experience up on the front guys, and we've got good experience in the backside. So between them, you gain a little bit from the defensive line, you gain a little bit from the secondary. So I think it all kind of evens out after a while.

Q. The linebackers, have you guys lost time in installing nickel and maybe some other packages because you're figuring out linebacker?

PHIL PARKER: I don't think so. I think we've been pretty on schedule. We went through all the installs so far. Right now we're done installing, and we've got everything in that we need to get in for right now. But basically that really didn't change anything. Whoever is in there, we're going to put a sub. We have enough

guys on the back end that we can put in there. And the good thing about Amani Hooker, he's another guy that can go ahead and play the star position along with Manny, so that's been beneficial. So when we run first or second team, we've still got a guy. Now, there might be double reps with some other guys at different positions, but we're going to live with that, and we're going to go ahead and do it, execute it.

Q. Like pull a linebacker off, and then same principle up front, your four best pass rushers --

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, it depends. Sometimes we might keep our four guys in there, but we like to get our fast guys on the field and our best pass rushers to get after the quarterback.

Q. To be clear, you said Sam Brincks is moving inside --

PHIL PARKER: No, I didn't -- he's moved inside to take some reps. He still does both. Chauncey still does both. The more flexibility that we have that we can put guys inside and outside is a benefit to us right now, and I think they both can do it. Obviously they can't play them at the same time, but I think they're doing a pretty good job of it.

Q. Last year you pretty much stuck with the three. Do you anticipate multiple linebackers playing throughout next season or is it too early to tell?

PHIL PARKER: I think it's too early to tell. I like to settle in on -- there's going to be somebody that's going to be the starter, so whoever that is, I think you play them until you think the other guy is better in, my opinion.

Q. One thing that a lot of your defensive guys have said during the spring period is the way Big Ten offenses are attacking defenses now has changed. You guys are essentially running pretty much the same defense and the same formation. I know things are different now. What kind of bridge from 1999 until now, how have you been able to do that? How is that defense still reliable in this day and age?

PHIL PARKER: I think in the last four or five years, it's definitely changed. The ability of the guys that we're recruiting out there, you look at Kirksey, when you had him out there, a guy that can run, I think you look at Ben, he was another guy that was long. He was a safety. And then his brother Nick, we've been very fortunate to have that unique guy in what we call the Leo outside backer to do those types of things.

The good thing about it is our kids keep on learning and the more reps they get at it, the better they become. But at some point in time, we're trying to keep on building if we can get a guy in there maybe like

Amani Hooker, which I'm not saying he's moving there, but that would be a type of guy that you'd want to put out there in certain personnel groupings. But you wouldn't want to put him in that situation if you're playing 21 personnel, if you're playing 22 personnel or 12 personnel. You probably wouldn't want to do that.

Q. I think you guys are a little undersized up front and you're moving bodies in trying to find pieces of work there. Do your safeties have to be more sewn into the running game if you're newish kind of between the tackles?

PHIL PARKER: I don't think so. Coach Moore has done a good job of getting those guys ready, and I think they can hold their point. At times I think some guys can get worn out, and that's why we're looking actually to make sure we have more guys that can rotate in there, and one of the advantages of spring ball is you have an opportunity to find out if they can go do it. We're not really sure, but after the first couple days we were unsure, then hey, it looks like they're doing pretty good in there. That is an option. And then obviously some kids can come in as freshmen and give us some more depth in there as we go along.

Q. You've got quite a bit of experience at corner, certainly more than, say, a first-round pick has last year going into the season. Where do things stand there, and also, you've always played true freshmen and have never really been concerned about that, and you've got some very talented ones coming in. Where do things stand at cornerback, and do any of them have a chance to break through in August?

PHIL PARKER: Well, right now, I think obviously Josh next week probably will be a first-round draft pick, and losing him, it's very similar to losing Desmond King and Greg Mabin. Like who is going to replace those guys. Michael Ojemudia has done a good job at his position. I think he's growing and maturing. Matt Hankins, which played late in the season as a starter, I think he's done a good job this spring. And Manny, he's a guy that can play inside and on the star that we had him, and I think eventually all three guys can do that. The guys that are going to come in as freshmen, when we get an opportunity to see them, I won't be afraid to put a guy in. Maybe can they give us another nickel role or can they be another guy. And I'm thinking that we'll have one or two guys that might have to play in the back end.

Q. How good of a professional do you think Josh Jackson is going to be and why?

PHIL PARKER: You know, it's kind of hard to say. I think he'll be in the league a long time. Based on his commitment to preparation and things he has to do in the NFL, it's a little bit different game than it is in

college, but he does have a lot of ability, and I think he has a lot of room to grow. I think one more year here would have maybe helped him grow a little bit more, but we understand the process that he went through.

I think he'll be a guy that will last 10 years. I wouldn't say, hey, will he be an all-pro guy, I can't say that. No, it's too hard to say. I don't know everybody in that league.

Q. Last year when Brandon was able to make it back for one game, he started, and then he was out. When he's all the way healthy, do you see that as a three-way competition at free safety? Is he going to move to back up Amani? Is it wide open when he gets back?

PHIL PARKER: When he gets back, we're going to take it step by step to see how he feels comfortable getting back into the rhythm, and I think when he gets back, I think we have at least two deep at safety at each position. I can't tell you that right now until I actually get to practice them. But I think it will be good for us to have the capability to have two deep at safety, and it might give us a little bit more flexibility on some of our other packages that we want to use.

Q. Seemed like Manny had a pretty up-and-down year last year. Do you agree with that, and how has he kind of responded this spring?

PHIL PARKER: I think it's a challenge as a true freshman to come in and play against Michigan and having a great year, and a lot of people patting you on the back, and I think maybe he might have lost his focus a little bit, not as detailed, maybe not as much of a time commitment. I'm not really sure. But you're right, up and down a little bit. But I thought for this spring, at times I think he's been really good, and he's working his tail off.

His job is to go ahead and prove that he's a starter, and obviously he's a starter at nickel, but he wants to be a starter in regular base defense.

Q. What type of growth have you seen from AJ?

PHIL PARKER: AJ is a very talented guy. There's times where I think he's really done a good job. He's still young and understanding the position. We had the capability the other day to flip him on the other side, so he can play right and left, and that's exciting to us. He still has a long ways to go to where I think he needs to be.

Q. What are some of those areas that you've seen that --

PHIL PARKER: He's got to be a little more disciplined in knowing his responsibility and understand that people are going to change formations, they're going to

change the calls for you. When you've got your hand in the ground, it's a lot harder for those defensive linemen to hear the secondary, the linebacker guys making calls. So he's definitely got to listen a little bit better.

Q. Outside we see a lot of guys you've got to replace, Josey Jewell, Josh Jackson, all your linebackers. You seem to be pretty confident that you can replace those guys and be comfortable.

PHIL PARKER: Well, it's always hard to replace three guys that played a lot of football here and had a lot of starts in between them.

But I think that it's up to everybody every year. We have to get them replaced. I think the defensive line and also the secondary has got to help these guys. And the more the guys understand the game of football at any position, whether you're D-line or whether you're a secondary coach or linebacker, the more you can help out each other, the guys that are playing next to you, and that's our goal is to make sure that everybody knows what's going on on every play, on every snap. You have to let the guys know next to you what you're doing. But you can't do that unless you know what's going on on the defense.

Q. Do you have mechanisms built in to where you guys are doing exactly what you just said, everybody knows?

PHIL PARKER: I'm not a big believer in tests and stuff like that, just like you go out on the field, that's your test, and you can always tell. But we've done a lot more of quizzing these guys, and nowadays you can get online and we can make up a test, a 10-question quiz, and we can tell when they start, when they finish, what time they started, and can shoot it out just like that. We know if a kid opened it up and was on there for an hour and a half, the kid must be struggling. He's on there for five minutes and he gets a perfect grade, he knows what he's doing.

We've been trying to do that and trying to educate these kids. My one goal for our guys is learn something, one thing, every day about our defense. Know it to the best of your knowledge. If you do that before the start of the season, everybody should be on the same page.

Q. In your opening remarks you mentioned that this is your 20th season. What were your hopes and goals 20 years ago when you left the job you'd been at a long time to come here?

PHIL PARKER: My goal was to be able to coach guys at a high level in the Big Ten, and it still is today. I've been blessed. I think the biggest, the most fun that I have is being in the film room with these guys watching film, practice film, game film, and the bond that you

build with these kids. To be able to take a kid and try to get him to his fullest potential before he gets here, that's all my goals are. There's nothing in here about, hey, this is my goal was to be the defensive coordinator here at Iowa. It wasn't that when I came here 20 years ago. And I still sit there and I think it's the best thing is trying to educate the kids that we have, make them the best football players they can be, the best people that they can be, and teach them about life.

Q. Do you ever think about being a head coach? Has that ever entered your mind?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, it would be nice sometimes, and when we go through it, and sometimes you like to be the head coach and make the decisions and change some calls out there when Coach moves -- hey, it's 2nd down, no, it's 3rd down, what down it is, yeah, that's when I'd like to be the head coach.

I think being the head coach, you become more a manager than actually coaching the game of football, so that's some things when it comes to it. If somebody gave me an opportunity, I'd take a swing at it, but I think you lose touch sometimes with the individual player at times. It's hard because all the other things that go on with media, alumni, and stuff. Obviously you guys know Kirk, he gets dragged a lot of different ways, and sometimes I wonder how he does it.

Q. What's the best way to defend the Hail Mary? What do you teach your back line, defensive backs to do? We've seen a lot of the ones that have been completed, especially Michigan State about six or seven years ago, Aaron Rodgers. They seem to hit right around the goal line. What do you do when somebody is, say, launching it from midfield?

PHIL PARKER: First thing I try to do is not get in that situation. That would be the first thing. Second thing, I would pray a little bit. But the whole object is -- my philosophy is, depending on how far they have to throw the ball down the field, and let's say if they have to throw the ball -- the receivers have to run 50 yards downfield, my objective is I'm going to bring the heat and make them throw the ball before they can throw it. Make them throw it now so the receivers aren't down there to catch it. That's one.

The other philosophy is to get as tight as you can on them, you jam them, three-man rush them, and play three guys over the top. And the biggest thing is you've got to have the right guy going and jumping for the ball, and you pick your guy, is it the tall he's guy, is it this guy. I always believe it's the guy that is the playmaker.

And you always do the coaching points is the best thing to do. You either go get it at the highest point, and if you can't put your hands around it and catch it,

you've got to slam it down to the ground. That's basically what we do. It's hard to practice live because of the injuries that might happen to your own guys.

Q. Would you ever recruit a wide receiver or tight end like Noah Fant?

PHIL PARKER: We thought about that. But how many times has he actually gone up and practiced that. Now, I'm sure if we got into a situation and took that time away from him, it would be hard to ask Brian if we could to take the tight ends for 20 minutes and practice jumping and knocking down a ball. But I think you'd have to work at it in practice. We've talked about it, but sometimes I always like to be confident of the guys that I know, that I work with.

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Brian Ferentz



BRIAN FERENTZ: Thank you guys for coming. It's good to be here four weeks into spring ball. It's a little easier than coming out week 1 and not having anything to talk about. We're 12 workouts in. Certainly we're making progress. We're improving. A lot of work left to be done before September 1st. But right now, pleased with the progress we're making.

With that, I'd open it up to questions.

Q. Where are you at running back?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Where are we at? We've got two guys back there that have carried the ball in games. I know we have two young guys that haven't. I think we feel confident that we have talented players, and I know we're inexperienced, but certainly not as inexperienced as we've been at other positions in the past. You've got both guys that have carried the ball in live action when it counted, not just in mop-up duty. So both guys have made plays for us in games, in tight ballgames. They just haven't made as many as maybe what we're used to bringing back the last few years.

I feel like a little bit unproven, but certainly not just an unknown.

Q. How do you feel about the development of the depth of your offensive line, and any guys that have kind of jumped up this spring?

BRIAN FERENTZ: You're always trying to build that depth. Where we're at right now, I don't think we're at seven or eight, which is where you'd like to be. Probably feel good about five or six guys, and with Levi missing time now, we're going to find out about some other guys. But the depth is never where you want it to be. Some guys have done a nice job this spring. Cole Banwart, especially, coming off of knee surgery, I feel like he's done a really nice job in his development, where he's at. Mark Kallenberger has done some good things for a young guy, young tackle, which really he's about the same age as one of the other tackles and a year younger than the other one, but he's certainly the young guy in the group right now, but he's done a nice job. I thought Levi Paulsen was doing good things before he had his injury. His brother Landan has done some nice things.

But as far as finding a six, seven, eight, I think we're still in flux and in that process.

Q. What do you look at in terms of is there a metric you look at to know if you're having a successful offense? Obviously points, but beyond that --

BRIAN FERENTZ: Points would be a good start, yeah.

Q. What do you look at when you try to --

BRIAN FERENTZ: You can look at a thousand things, but I think at the end of the day, what you're trying to do is make sure you're doing things you need to do to win ballgames, and if you look at the NCAA as a whole or if you look at the Big Ten Conference, and certainly we've done studies, and we've looked at all that information, some of the things are pretty obvious. What's important, points is one thing that's important, scoring offense. You want to talk about winning critical situations, whether it's in the red area, whether it's 3rd downs, or sometimes turnovers can be a misleading statistic. Obviously it's important to have a good turnover margin. Time of possession has been one thing that's kind of come up throughout probably the history of the game as something that's critical when you actually look at the numbers. It's not always as critical as you'd like.

I really think that a lot of it has to do with the ballgame you're playing in and the team you're playing against. You're going to play in certain games where certainly points are at a premium. You're going to play in other games where field position is at a premium. You're going to play in other games where time of possession is at a premium. But you're trying to balance all those things, so I think when you look at the end of the year, it's difficult to just point to just one thing and say, hey, this is the be-all-end-all. And this is going to sound cliché, and I know this is no fun to write about, but at the end of the day, the No. 1 metric we're looking at to figure out if we're where we need to be offensively is are we winning games or are we losing them.

Our job is to play complementary football. Like I said, each game is a little bit different. But certainly I think if you had to pick one thing, scoring offense is pretty important, just like I think the inverse of that, scoring defense is much more important than the yards you're giving up.

Q. You may have the exact same answer for this, but what at the end of the season in your mind

would constitute a satisfying offensive season?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, did we maximize our potential as a football team. Did we win as many games as we'd like to win, and ultimately the goal of the program is to win the Big Ten Championship. To me I feel like if we win the Big Ten Championship, let's start with the Big Ten West, then we have a pretty good offense. I'm not really interested in what the numbers are, other than the wins and losses.

Q. Three years ago you were a play away from the national playoffs and your Big Ten Championship you spoke about. What do you need to do to get from here back to there?

BRIAN FERENTZ: What do we need to do? We need to be consistent. We need to execute at a high level. And I think we just need to get back to maximizing our ability, and if you look at that group, we had a pretty veteran group, and I know we had a new quarterback, but he had played. We had a lot of offensive linemen coming back. We had replaced two tackles. We had a pretty solid interior coming back, including a veteran center. So we felt like we were veteran there. We were veteran outside. We weren't necessarily veteran in the tailback room, but we had guys with experience that had played, and we had two really good tight ends that year. Both guys are playing in the National Football League.

We had a lot of talent, but more importantly, we maximized what we had that year. We played really tight, really together, and when the games were close, we found a way to win those games, and I don't know if there's a metric to measure that. I just think it comes down to playing good football and executing at the level you're capable of executing at, whatever that is. Each team is a little bit different.

Q. How cognizant are you of balance from a play calling perspective? On 3rd down especially, I looked at the two different years, and in 2016 when tight ends or fullbacks were on the field on 3rd down, you ran 45 of 47 times, whereas last year it was 57 of 80, and the same thing with passing. 74 out of 75 third down plays with 11 personnel in '16 were passes, whereas last year it was I think 73 of 98. So just you're running more in 11 and you're passing more out of other ones. Was that a goal of yours, something you strived for, or is that just the way it organically worked out?

BRIAN FERENTZ: You've confused me with a lot of those numbers at this point. (Laughter.)

I think I understand the gist of your question, and really it's kind of like the question Chad asked. It just varies by ballgame, and it varies by situation. I think if you look at our 3rd down numbers as a whole, that could

be a little misleading. It may not tell the whole story because here's a good situation. It's overtime last year in the Northwestern game. They go down, they score a touchdown. So we take possession on the 25-yard line. Immediately you're in four-down territory, right? Field goal doesn't help you, you know you need to score a touchdown to prolong the game, extend the game. So when you look at a sequence like that from a play calling standpoint, really 3rd down doesn't happen until 4th down. So in some ways when we're in a four-down situation which we are fairly often, we try to be aggressive with our mentality and trying to score.

Some of those 3rd downs are probably more realistically 2nd-down type calls, and I just remember that sequence in particular because we were sitting at 3rd and 8 or 3rd and 7, and we felt like we had a good call on 4th and 4 or less, probably better call than we felt like we had on 4th and 7, so we hopped in the shotgun and we gave a slight passing look, but hammered the ball up in there, just to try to get three or four yards and get into a more manageable situation.

I don't know if it's fair to compare it year to year because I think the situations change. But certainly you want to try to run the ball a little bit on 3rd down if you can. It becomes difficult.

I think if you really broke it down and look at where those runs happened, a lot of them are in four-down type territory, or they're in 3rd and 16, and I don't think it takes a genius to know in play calling there's not many good calls. Sometimes you just want to protect the punt, as no fun as that sounds. You just don't want to do something dumb.

And if you look at the flipside of that, we threw four interceptions last year. Two of them came on 3rd and longs, and they were just -- they weren't good football plays, and we certainly would have been better off just taking a knee. So I think you've got to factor all those things in. You try to be as unpredictable and exciting as you can be to some extent, but at the end of the day, sometimes the most obvious call is the best call.

Q. What did you learn about yourself as you look back over your first year as offensive coordinator, and what can you do better in particular?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think I learned that I'm not really as good at it as I'd like to be. And I think if you do anything, that should be the way you're looking at it. But tried to be realistic going into it. I've been around long enough now to understand that anything you do, you're probably going to improve over time. But you have to be willing to get out of your comfort zone a little bit and push forward.

There's a lot of things that I can do better just from a

personal standpoint, but I think the main thing is just trying to do a better job of putting our football team in a position to be successful and to have a chance to succeed. Whether it's Scott's question about 3rd downs or whether it's the 1st down play call, just trying to make sure that we're using the right pieces the best way that we can and trying to give ourselves a chance to win. Going back to your question, Mike, the goal is to win a Big Ten Championship; how do we best get there, and what can I do to help us get there? What's my role on the team?

I think the biggest thing for me is learning how to do a better job of maximizing the role I'm in now because it was new to me a year ago.

Q. What do you know now that maybe you didn't know a year ago?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, I don't know where you want to start with that. You're going to have to help me out and be a little bit more -- I know what it feels like to call a play in a game. I didn't know that a year ago. I know what it's like to go through an installation in spring ball and training camp and putting all that together. I didn't know what that was like necessarily a year ago. So just things like that. You asked me a hard question. You'd have to catch me after a few beers or something like that to probably get like a real profound answer.

Q. You also know what it's like to have an offense that's just rolling, like against Iowa State, Ohio State, and then an offense that sputters like against Wisconsin. How hard is it to get consistency, and is there a common denominator with teams that do somehow find a way to be consistent?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, I think typically teams that find a way to be consistent, the common denominator is they're good teams that win a lot of games. I think another common denominator would be experience and cohesiveness. Consistency usually comes from those types of things.

Limiting factors are inexperience, flux, injuries, things of that nature. So to some extent you're trying to avoid as much of that as you can. Realistically you have to know that that's going to happen, so you want to try to build as much depth as you can so there's not a huge drop-off. But I think just the bottom line is, any way you slice it, a year ago we were -- it was our first dance together, everybody, and now we're going into year two, and hopefully you have a little bit more singleness of purpose, a little bit more cohesiveness, whether it's the staff, the players, familiarity in the system, those kind of things. Hopefully that'll help us build that. But I just think it's a never-ending process.

Going back to Mike's question, to piggy-back that, if

you're talking about what you know a year later, you've been through some of those things. You've been there in those games where things are rolling, and it's kind of like -- I'm watching "Star Wars" with my son the other day, and I would use this analogy. Okay, when you're in the Wisconsin game, it's like you're the pilot of that little sad rebel ship at the opening of Star Wars. Darth Vader's Star Destroyer is closing on that ship, right. That's what the Wisconsin game feels like. But if it's the Ohio State game or the Nebraska game, then you're Luke Skywalker making the trench run in the Death Star. Everything is going to go right, don't worry about it. Use the Force, Luke, you'll be all right; call whatever you want.

So you learn what those things feel like. But I think the most important thing is once you get to the end of that and you have those learning experiences, you just kind of learn that some of those things are out of your control, and what you need to focus on is doing what you can do as well as you can do it.

Q. Putting your playmakers in position to make plays, how do you do that with someone like Brandon Smith?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Brandon Smith, that's easy. He's an receiver, so he's going to be singled a lot of the time. What Brandon needs to do is keep developing because I don't know if he's demonstrated he is a playmaker yet. If we can get him to become one, boy, that would be terrific. It's not hard to move him around. Some of the other guys, it's a little bit harder to find spots for them. We're not going to find out until September 1st, but he's made progress, and we're excited about that. But until you do it in a game, it's kind of like -- I was pretty smart until I called a play in a game, right? And then I did it, and I don't know if I was so smart anymore or not, but at least I was a proven commodity one way or the other.

Q. So what can he do between now and then to --

BRIAN FERENTZ: Keep improving. Yeah, keep improving. Keep getting better, keep doing the little things to improve. We've seen a lot of those things with him, whether it's just technique on a release or route running, cleaning up some of those details, consistency, and the effort he's giving every day, which has been excellent right now. But to keep that going from now until September 1st and then through that, that's going to be the challenge. Certainly it's not a sprint we're running. It is most definitely a marathon and probably with conditions that are a little bit more similar to the one in Boston yesterday. So we need mudders. We need guys that are going to keep working and keep grinding away. He's demonstrating that right now, but until he does something in a game besides fumble on an out rout, it's going to be a little bit hard to say that he's a guy we want to put in position to

make plays.

Q. Do you prefer coaching tight ends to running backs?

BRIAN FERENTZ: It's more comfortable for me. It's more of a comfort zone. I've done it before. It's kind of how I cut my teeth. And certainly it's a little bit more central position within the whole group. So it's a little bit more comfortable for me.

But coaching running backs was fun. It was a challenge. It was new -- as far as teaching in a room like that with some of those players, it's a totally different perspective, and every day you're on your toes. You're dealing with a little bit more as far as checking up on guys and staying on top of guys. You're dealing with some more wild cards, which is fine. That's good. But this is definitely more my comfort zone.

Q. How has this offense stood the test of time?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think all good offenses, and I don't know that we are one, but all good offenses when we've had success here, I would marry it to anybody else in the country that's having success at any level. Probably run the football pretty well, have the ability to control the tempo of the game through the running game, do a nice job of converting on 3rd down or in the red area, in those critical situations. Again, I'm not sure it really matters how you do those things.

For us, I heard a high school coach speak, very intelligent guy, this off season, and one of his first comments was, whatever your philosophy is, it had ought to marry your knowledge base, and that seems like kind of a ridiculous statement, but I think you'd be surprised how many places you go or how many games you watch, high school, college, pro, where people are trying to do things that they don't really understand because there's a lot of football. There's a lot of football. I'm fascinated by it, but I don't really understand it, couldn't teach it.

I think at the end of the day, the reason that we've had some success from a sustained perspective here is when things go wrong, which they inevitably will, you have to be able to get under the hood and fix it, and if you don't understand what you're dealing with, I think you're going to have a hard time.

If my car broke down, I would call somebody to fix it right away because I don't know how to do that. So I think what we're trying to do is just do what we know, and you see consistency over a long time, but the major players, the characters haven't changed.

Q. Is there anything out there that you see -- RPO, anything out there that you see that you think,

hmm, maybe Iowa could do that? Do you see anything that tempts you to maybe not break the mold but --

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think you're tempted all the time. That's the trick to doing anything offensively. I'd like to think at the end of the day, that's the difference between professionals and amateurs. There's a lot of things I'm fascinated by. One of my favorite styles of play to watch is that Hal Mumme, Mike Leach air-raid system. I love watching those guys. I'm thoroughly enthralled by how they do things. In fact, I would argue there's a lot of parallels between what they do and what we do. Totally different philosophies, okay, but those guys run about six plays. However, they have 11 guys on the field that understand conceptually what is going on on every snap, and they can make adjustments within those things. They can get under the hood and fix it. I'm thoroughly entertained by those guys.

When you talk about RPOs, the run pass option, that's been around as long as football has been around, and there's a million different variations of that. Would I love to do some of that, would we love to do some of that, yeah, probably, but now you're talking about time on task and getting things done. When you're talking about an RPO, we RPO -- I'd say probably 50 percent of our run game involves an RPO. The difference between us and the Philadelphia Eagles, we're doing it pre-snap because that's just how we're going to operate. We're going to go play under center. If we want to do post snap, now all of a sudden we're in the gun and there's an exchange involved. If you post-snap read something and there's an exchange involved, that's not as simple as just putting somebody in the gun and saying, hey, we're going to read this guy post-snap. That's a lot of work. That's individual time, that's team time.

It's like no-huddle. I think no-huddle is a fascinating thing. But unless you're going to live in that world, unless you're going to commit to that and be in that full-time, it's probably not a road you want to go down.

So you try to incorporate some of those things into what you're doing the best you can, but there's always constraints within what you really can get done and how you can best maximize what you do without just getting too exotic. There's nothing worse than being a little too cute.

Q. Do you feel like maybe the quarterback coming back and most of your receivers and tight ends coming back, do you see potential growth in the passing game this year, like big-time growth?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Define growth.

Q. 2,000 yards --

BRIAN FERENTZ: I wouldn't even begin to go down that road. To me, what we're trying to do is throw the ball efficiently, so we want to make sure our completion percentage hopefully is up there over 60 percent. That's where we'd like to be. We were 57 last year. That's just not good enough. The yardage isn't as important. The production isn't as important. I know if we're throwing the ball efficiently, we'll be moving the ball. We'll be where we want to be. Should we be closer to that? Yeah, I'd like to think we are. But there's just so many factors that go into that, I don't know what's going to happen.

I know this: We have a quarterback who's closer to the mastery of the system. With that I think is going to come some production, because really, when you're talking about the quarterback, an offense is just a toolset. It's a set of tools; there it is in your toolbox. The problem is if you're a guy who's in the first year, you don't necessarily know which tools to bust out when. You get a little bit more mastery in that thing, and then all of a sudden you can get the right tool for the job on the field during the game. We're not an offense that's going to look to the sideline.

We put a lot on our quarterback. I think that's why a lot of players in our system are coveted. We ask them to think. We don't just have everybody turn and look to the sideline and we hold up some super cool poster board. We don't do that. We feel like our quarterback has the best seat in the house. He can see things better than any of us, and when he gets that mastery where now he can run the show and he can drive the bus from where he's sitting, then I think we have a chance to be a little bit better.

Q. Are you starting to have more skill guys come to you during a game or in practice now and come up to you and -- the concepts are kind of sinking in to the point where -- are they sinking in to the point where they're looking at a coverage, reading the coverage and tweaking the route --

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, you hope to build all those things that way. So when you talk about a passing concept or a run play for that matter, 99 percent of it to me is conceptual understanding. I tell our players all the time, it's like I said about the quarterback, when it is game day, it doesn't matter if I'm upstairs or downstairs, whether that's a topic or not. That's just so irrelevant on game day because I'm here and they're there. I've gone through this before. It's interesting as a line coach, sometimes, boy, it seems like this guy is only -- I know that on a college football field, I know exactly where the hashes are in relation to the sideline. I know exactly where the numbers are in relation to the sideline, so I know exactly how many yards this guy is

away from me, and I'm hollering at him, and it's like, boy, he can't hear me for some reason on game day, because he can pretend he can't hear me. They get real good at not hearing me on game day, especially when what I'm saying maybe is not what they want to hear.

But I only use that to illustrate this point: When the ball is getting snapped, here I am back here. It doesn't matter what I know. It doesn't matter what any of us know. Coach O'Keefe, any of us. It doesn't matter how loud we yell. None of that matters. What matters is what they do when the ball is snapped.

So to your question do we have that conceptual understanding, I think we're closer. If you look at the single biggest limiting factor in my estimation that we had a year ago, it was lack of conceptual understanding. And so, you know, there's very simple things: Who is the flat defender? How can we affect him in what we're trying to do? If we're trying to read the flat defender, then boy, we ought to be able to affect him within what we're doing. To your point, I think we're getting closer to that, but I don't think we're there by any means. We have a lot of work to do.

Q. How much further along is the offense this spring than last year because you don't have to evaluate multiple quarterbacks who could potentially start?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Now we're trying to evaluate a guy who's going to be our second-string quarterback, which in some ways is even more nerve-racking because there's guys we're trying to evaluate all the time. I think there's players within our offense that are certainly further ahead than where we were a year ago, but there's a lot of guys that are still kind of at square one. There's a lot of guys we're going to be counting on again this season that really 12 months ago were getting ready to go to prom or graduate or whatever, and there's a whole bunch of them.

Are we a little bit further ahead, sure, but for a lot of guys on our roster, this is still their first spring. So we're trying not to take anything for granted and just push them along each step of the way.

Q. When you were a teenager, I assume maybe you came to practice a time or two. What were your first impressions of Phil Parker, and then having worked with him for several years as a coach, what are your thoughts about him now?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, I don't necessarily remember Phil as a teenager coming to practice. I remember coming to practice my first day on the scout team and getting a pretty good impression of what Phil Parker was as a coach. That was the first time I was really

around him would have been 2001 being on the offensive scout team, and I'll never forget down on the old defensive field, which is behind that water treatment plant right there, and there was a stench that comes off that water treatment plant at about 4:45 p.m., it smells like maple syrup and something far less pleasant than that, sulfur maybe. It's just a real thick -- there's vivid memories I have of that field. That's one of them. Phil Parker having a screaming match with every single defensive back on the field, that's another memory I have, whether it was Bob Sanders; at that time DJ Johnson was one of our corners; Antwan Allen, who's in my class, was another corner. I mean, just screaming matches, screaming matches.

And it was like just how they communicated. Phil is a very passionate person. You guys don't always get that.

But I remember that, and certainly I think what I remember more about Phil than anything is just the amount of respect and the amount of admiration he commands as a player, as a young person, because of, number one, what he has done and accomplished in his time, and two, just how he carries himself and the knowledge he has as a coach and his ability as a teacher to make very complex systems and thoughts -- like I know our defense gets kind of pegged for being simplistic. I'm not sure there's a more complex coverage system than what our guys play, and he makes it very simple for those players.

I remember as a young guy being in awe of that, and certainly working with him for the last six years, you're not going to find a guy that works harder or cares more. And he's been here 20 years. You know, I think that gets lost.

You've got a couple guys here, obviously the head coach has been here 20 years. He's probably had opportunities to leave, I would imagine they've been well-documented. I don't think the opportunities for some of the other guys like Phil Parker or Chris Doyle get as documented, and yet they've stayed here throughout all that time and been here and been a part of this.

So when you take that kind of loyalty, that kind of commitment, and on top of it, like I said, I saw it as a young person, his ability as a coach, as a motivator, as a teacher, as a leader, and then to be across from it every day, it's nice to come to work with people that you respect and admire, and more importantly, come to work every day with people that you can learn from, so just be taking notes. That's what I've learned.

Q. Your 12 personnel was your most productive grouping last year. How much of that is because

you have two tight ends who produced at a high, high level last year, and what is -- I assume because it's a neutral formation that people can't automatically expect run-pass; how good can it be and also the tight ends?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Sure, I'm only kidding you. 12 personnel is a very unique set from this standpoint offensively. Regardless of personnel, 12 personnel can play as 11 personnel, it can play as 21 personnel. In some ways, it can play as other things. You could be empty, you can be in a split gun. You can do all kinds of things from one personnel grouping. So I think when you look at it, if you talked to Phil, he would probably tell you the same thing. What you have to do defensively is immediately kind of identify who the people are, who the players are, because if Noah Fant is the second tight end, you probably need to be aware of that, and you may want to play it more like you would play a three-receiver set.

Regardless of how we may line up, you probably don't want to get too crazy in some of the coverage things, put guys in bad spots.

If we have two bigger tight ends in there, you're probably going to treat it a little differently. I always think the key is this, and I've been around guys in the National Football League that would not block, that refuse to block, and it always seemed like such a silly thing to me because it really limits your production as a tight end.

If Noah Fant can go in there and be an in-line guy and be a serious blocker where they have to respect closing down both C-gaps or putting him in a wing or bringing him out of the backfield, then it's going to limit what they can do defensively, and certainly it's going to make for more opportunity for him.

It's one of those personnel groupings where if you have the right pieces, boy, you'd like to spend some time in it because it puts a little more pressure on the defense. You can be slotted, you can be pro, you can be three open, you can do a lot of things that are kind of challenging for them.

The flipside of that, the last part of that equation is how much can you realistically expect your personnel to be able to handle within all those things, because we can go in a room and we can all draw a bunch of stuff up and it looks great, but it goes back to what we were talking about earlier: Game day, here's me, here's all the coaches, here's everybody else. There are the 11 guys that have to do it, and if they don't understand it and they don't know it, then it's not going to matter how great the system or the scheme is. I've seen a lot of really bad calls look really good because guys were executing and understood what to do, and I've seen a

lot of great calls look terrible because the only guy that understood it was the guy that called it. That's not going to work.