

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



Iowa 22, Rutgers 0

KIRK FERENTZ: Just really proud of our players, our staff, everybody involved. Total effort, and certainly it was a really good week for our football team, capped off today.

Nothing was easy out there today, and we had a lot of respect for Rutgers for obvious reasons, coming in with six wins, and they've been impressive watching them on tape.

As I mentioned on Tuesday, I think Coach Schiano is really building a program over there. A lot of respect for them. Our guys played through some bumps during the course of the first half, left some opportunities out there. They kept playing, stayed focused.

I thought they were great at halftime, and certainly played probably our best second half of football since we got started here, and I thought last week probably was in that category. This one certainly was a little bit better.

Most notably the offense I think took a big step. We put points on the board in the second half, but even in the first half I think if you look what they did, we had field position that was not real good two times inside the 10. Still found a way to drive it out there and give Tory a chance to flip field position. We weren't necessarily holding the field position the way we wanted to, but that was better in the second half certainly.

Just as the game kept going, thought our guys got more confident, and we did some good things out there.

Just in a nutshell, November football, I've said that before, it's really where things kind of shape up or don't shape up for football teams, and the biggest number one line on the list Monday was just talked about improvement. It's incumbent on everybody to try to improve, coaches, players, and I've always believed that you can improve any week, not just early in the season or camp.

We wanted to take advantage of that, and we did see a lot of improvement today. It's a residual thing. We'll keep

trying to build on that.

Thrilled to get our eighth win. Happy about that certainly, and again, mostly just can't tell you how proud I am of our players. Got a good quality group of guys that show up every day with a great attitude, and they care about each other. I think that showed today.

Q. There's a lot of resiliency associated with your team and program, but I think first and foremost you look at the quarterback, Deacon Hill, today 200 plus yards, you had 400 plus yards as a total, but he seemed to really take a lot of steps forward. What does it mean for you to make those steps, and what areas did you see the most growth?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think general comfort. I've been seeing them for a while.

You can't microwave this stuff -- same thing with the offensive line. I thought today was their best day. But it's a matter of you've got to practice, you've got to watch film, look what you're not doing well and then keep working at it.

Deacon still made the one mistake there right before halftime, but I thought clearly he was playing with more confidence out there. We were helping him a little bit more.

But most importantly, he did the job. You talk about resiliency, I think that's the first word I would use with him because I'm guessing he's probably been hearing a lot of negative stuff out there.

Instead of worrying about that, he's been focused on trying to get better, working hard with the coaches and practicing better. You hope that's how it works for everybody, and he's certainly right at the front of the list on that.

Q. There's no secret that the offense had been heavily criticized this year, but for them to go out, get 400 plus yards against a really good Rutgers defense, a lot of the guys credited you and the way you've been coaching throughout the week. How have you kept this offensive flow and really just continued to help them laser focus and push forward to deliver the kind of performance they did today?



KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I've done it long enough where -- I've been on the wrong side of a lot of stuff in my time, coaching, certainly playing, and again, all you really learn is you can't do anything, you keep working with what you have.

In our case, the good thing is most of our issues have been -- it's not that we haven't had enough, we haven't had them available.

Being realistic, listening to whoever beat the Jets last week, and they were talking about the Jets' situation on coming in Tuesday morning, doesn't matter, and they're talking about it. It's not the same when you lose an experienced quarterback.

So that's fine; who's playing and what can you do with those guys, and that's really where your focus goes. Yeah, we're going to have some problems. Our three most explosive guys potentially offensively aren't out there, but the season won't get canceled, so you just keep playing.

The guys we have, fortunately, are good guys, and they work hard. I'm happy to see them experience a little success because at some point you've got to have some tangible evidence that that does work, too, and hopefully now Deacon can feel a little bit more confident next time he's out there under center. Hopefully the line feels a little bit more confident. And they should; they did a good job today. I'm eager to see the film.

That's how you build things. We've done a lot of building around here. That's part of the process. When you lose guys, you've got to try to rebuild and reboot, and every now and then you get lucky with some guys, too.

Q. You hold the Big Ten's leading rusher to 39 rushing yards on 13 carries. What was the key to really slowing him down when even Ohio State couldn't slow him down?

KIRK FERENTZ: It felt like he had 100 yards today standing on the sideline. I've got an issue that way with my head.

If you look at their season this year, the couple games that they did struggle, he was contained by the defense, the April posing defense, so certainly it was a key, and we had a lot of respect for the quarterback, too.

If the running back got it going, which you can see why, he's a good football player. That was a big key for us to keep him under control, and it was a team effort, the guys up front, the linebackers certainly, safeties filling in but it is easier said than done.

Q. Kaleb Brown has his first catch of the season last week. He comes in today in the absence of Diante Vines and kind of fills up the stat sheet. What did you think of his performance and first touchdown as well?

Yeah, every touchdown looks good to me. Same theme. He is a whole different guy than he was six, seven weeks ago. I don't know how much he did last year. He wasn't here. I don't know if he was on the scout team or just standing there watching Harrison, all their good guys running around. So I don't think he was working a lot at that position. It was new to him coming out of high school.

This is all new to him, and he's been great. He's been working hard, especially these last couple weeks he's been kind of wired in, certainly making a big play last week I'm sure gave him some confidence that maybe he didn't have a couple weeks ago, and he took it another step today, and we had an opportunity there with Diante being out.

Traditionally our best stories, usually our best guys have to play their best and then the other guys have to rise to a level where they can help us win football games, and he looked really good out there today. It's so encouraging for all of us.

Q. 11 possessions today, no three-and-outs. You just said it was your best game by the O-line. Can you explain kind of how you got to the starting point? You had a lot of injuries. How that came together?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, if you had seen the practice Monday, which you guys aren't allowed to, but it was looking a little thin, and we really didn't know who was going to be available or not. It was not really looking too good.

But credit to our guys, and Logan tried to go today, and he couldn't really anchor down there. But I think we'll have a chance to get him back next week.

You have to throw the tight ends in there, too, because we're down three out of four.

But the guys that were out there did a good job, and they found a way to get that thing done. Again, it's part of the game.

One thing about November, everybody has got problems in November. Everybody. Everybody has got guys hurt and guys sore and all that stuff.

You can worry about what your problems are, or you can just figure, hey, we've got to try to push through, and the

other team has got some challenges, too.

Q. A lot of production out of Deacon Hill after a few weeks of not really having a whole lot. Was there like a schematic change in how you approached today's game plan, or is it just execution making that big step up, and if it's just execution, where does that come from?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think we've been trying to be really mindful and smart, and we try to do it with everybody, whoever is in the game. There's no position more important than the quarterback. Our quarterback situation was limited at the start of the year because Cade had the quad issue, and then certainly was altered when Cade went down with a knee issue.

So now you throw a guy in there who's never done anything in the game. So yeah, you're trying to always be mindful. I don't know if he was any different today.

But the thing that was good, I thought, was play action he did a nice job. He did a good job in the drop-back game, which was critical. Made some really nice third down plays. We had the two-minute drive right before half.

A lot of things that we couldn't have done four weeks ago. But that's just practice, and there's again, no panacea, no magic pill you give guys.

I think really the key to the whole thing is guys keeping a good attitude, not getting down on themselves despite what everybody is saying, just staying focused on what they can do and what they can do to get better.

That's Deacon. That's a bunch of guys on our football team. That's what you like to see.

Q. I think you've joked about Ricky Stanzi needing to go out and throw an interception. The last couple weeks Drew Stevens has missed an early field goal and come back and had a really nice game. How much mental fortitude does it take for a guy like that to miss a kick early, then come back and have a great game?

KIRK FERENTZ: So first of all, Ricky isn't coming back. He isn't playing again, so it's OK with him.

As far as Drew, he is still playing, so no, we've got to knock that off.

I actually mentioned Ricky yesterday when talking to the TV guys.

To be a kicker, to be a specialist, to be a quarterback,

you'd better be a guy who can get up off the mat, and if you screw something up, you've got to get back in it.

It would be OK if we nailed the first one, too, from 30. I think it was from 30. So for him, that's a chip shot. It would have done him a little bit better to be 3-0 at that point. It takes the air out of the balloon, have a nice drive, get it down there, and then right down. Not good.

Q. Jay was just talking about the importance of Quinn Schulte. What stood out as you've kind of seen him go on his development here at Iowa?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, what I tease Phil Parker about, you can't play free safety at Iowa unless you're a walk-on. That's just how it is, and Quinn is in that boat. Then Phil plays this little game, too -- it took him about a year and a half, Quinn's second year, maybe it was in the summer, where he actually doesn't know his name. It's a little game he plays. I know Phil well enough now. I could tell he liked him right from the start. He's a serious, hardworking, focused guy. He wasn't good enough to play at that point, but he had all the right attributes.

It was kind of a matter of time before he was going to start -- he's been a good player for us, and he's a strong team leader, too, and just so respected because his work ethic is -- I'm not in the room all the time.

But you just hear his teammates talk about him, studying film, all the things he does. It's pretty impressive, and that's the reason why he plays so well.

Q. You talked about it just a minute ago; I've noticed since 2017, 2018 that I guess when daylight savings time starts ends and when it gets colder out, you guys start playing, pardon the pun, but lights-out football. Do you change your approach when November 1 rolls around, or is it a sense of urgency? In November in recent years your teams have played great.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I would characterize it this way: We do change things a little bit, and if anything we're doing less. We spend a little bit less time on the field, less time in pads, try to be careful because you're at the wrong end of the season that way.

I think the bigger story is like we just have always -- we've never been world beaters, and I don't know if our best team was 0-2, you could argue that, but we were a lot better team in October and November, especially in November, and I think -- I feel confident we would have beaten Ohio State in '02 in November. They would have kicked our ass in September. There's no doubt in my mind either way.

Just to give you an example, like that team in '02 just really grew and built itself. It's pretty much been true of any of our good teams.

I think it's repetition. It's awareness. Our shelves aren't stocked the way some people's are, so guys have to get the experience just like some of the guys we're talking about here. They have to get that experience, go through it, go through the heartbreaks, the disappointments, all the things that come with competing, and then get back in there and try to climb.

Same thing for players or teams, it really doesn't matter. That's kind of been our approach, our philosophy. It's not always right.

The key point in all this stuff, it's like Deacon, you have to have the right people to have that work. We've had years where it wasn't so good. We were 4-2 in '12, and then -- I think that was it, yeah, 4-2 and then 4-8. Not so fast. '07, 5-1, ended up 6-6. So it was 1-5 down the stretch.

I mean, nothing personal, but that's just tells you about a team or how the coaches did that year and that kind of stuff. That's how we look at it.

Q. Deacon Hill has come to these things week after week after games, hasn't been distraught. He hasn't been clicking his heels, but he hasn't been distraught. Looks us in the eyes, gives us straight talk. His teammates came in here today, said that his attitude has been great. With the weight of the world on his shoulders, how do you keep him going forward instead of backward?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I've never met his parents, but I think he comes from a really good family from what I know. It probably starts there.

Just fast forward here, so after the guys are all out there and he's holding a press conference. I think he's talking to SportsCenter and everybody else out there on the field, so he comes in the locker room after everybody is already in there, and the way the team greeted him I think said it all. Just great respect for him. They all like him.

We have an out of season project, we're going to try to get him in a little better shape physically. That's a discussion for a different day.

The guy just shows up. He's quality. He's a good person, and he has a really good attitude.

If you're going to play this game, you'd better be able to take a punch, and he's taken a few of them. If you play

quarterback, you'd better be able to get back up on your feet after you get knocked down, and he's done that.

It's like all of the guys we were working with are just quality guys. I'm saying all these nice things about these guys. We're going to have to be a little bit stern this week, I guess, maybe.

But they've really -- they just keep showing up and trying to get better, and Deacon I think is really -- I'm just so happy to see him be able to come in tonight and walk out of here feeling really good about himself. He needed that badly. Great kid.

Q. I wanted to ask you about yourself but also the adversity that this program has faced, which every year there's adversity, but this one seems to be much more embedded from -- well, 15 different things, gambling, injuries, to even news of your son last week, but yet you're two games up now in the Big Ten West Division and clinched a share of it. What does it mean for you to see your team respond week in and week out and see your defense -- one offensive touchdown in four games.

KIRK FERENTZ: It's all you can do. You just keep pushing. The one thing I've always enjoyed about football and not enjoyed about football is it's very humbling. You never have it figured out. That's like real life is the same way.

All you can do is show up and try to do your best, give it an honest day's effort and have a good attitude, and then you never quit. You never quit.

That's what the guys are doing.

The big thing right now, we have two opportunities. Nothing is going to be easy. You hear the scores from around the country today, nothing is ever easy, nothing is ever predictable. But the good news is once the guys get to taste some success, I think that grows confidence a little bit, and we need to grow confidence. We're in bad need of that.

Hopefully we can build on this, and we'll see how these next two weeks go.

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Iowa 22, Rutgers 0

Player Quotes

Kinnick Stadium | Nov. 11, 2023

Jay Higgins

Linebacker

On defense improving week by week:

“I would say what our head coach preaches is always get better. Obviously, with Coach Parker and Coach Wallace – I am very high on them – they let us know how to stop these guys. We come here every Saturday and are so confident in the gameplan so its easy to go out there and play hard. We know if we go out there and play hard and do our job, everything should be good.”

On adjustments made in the second half:

“Their game plan switched because of the first half success. Their situations were different. Rutgers knew they had to get points on the board. We knew what was going to happen, we knew what to expect. With their quarterback being dual threat, you have to make sure that you contain him properly and not just play coverage. We did a great job making sure our eyes and feet were disciplined.”

On Kinnick Stadium atmosphere:

“It helps us playing in Kinnick, obviously with the fan support. It especially helps in a third and short situation, where the third and two turns into a third and seven. That completely changes the playcall. That completely changes the percentages of them converting and getting that first down. Our job is to get off the field on third down. I love playing at Kinnick. That is one of the things you love about playing home games.”

On mental toughness and resilience of the team:

“We’ve been playing some really good teams and these guys had their ways of hurting our defense, but just what this locker room has done, we’ve done a great job staying together. That is what you’re going to get out of an Iowa team. As a player, it is our job to follow our leader and with Coach Ferentz being the leader that he is, I don’t think there is any surprise when it comes to us being as close as we are.”



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Nick Jackson
Linebacker

On holding Rutgers to 127 total yards:

“I think it starts with the defensive line, a lot. Those guys playing the blocks and just really being physical in the run game, trying to get them out of the things that they really like to do. That was a heck of a football team to just play against. We knew going in that they had a great quarterback and running back, but I think we did a really great job.”

On expectations and outcomes:

“I could not be happier. Anytime you go into the transfer portal, you take a risk, and you just never know what you’re really getting into with the whole recruiting process. Hats off to Coach Wallace. He has preached everything that he told me, and I’m really thankful to be a Hawkeye. I can’t even put it into words.”

On the buy-in from the defense:

“Everyone bought into the culture.... I’m really thankful for the defensive line-- it is a great secondary line-- and the coaches that have helped me be a better person. The coaches have put us in the right spot. I am really thankful for this defense.”



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Kaleb Brown
Wide Receiver

On his touchdown reception:

“I just saw a guy pretty much more to my inside, and I knew I could beat him with speed. So, I did that. It felt great to be in the end zone again.”

On increased role and impact over the last two games:

“It has been great for me, honestly. I really can’t put into words what it’s like. The experience has been crazy, but it has been easy for me. Just go out and be with the guys that I am always with and just have confidence in them. So, it has been great.”

On why the offense was more productive statistically this week:

“I would say just executing when it counted. That was all. It was just a matter of time.”

On emotions after a breakout performance:

“A lot of emotions, I would say. Just coming back to the sidelines and realizing what is actually going on, because down on the field it is kind of like a laser focus. You are not really focused on anything else but the opportunity and your job. It was just crazy to think about, like, I worked for this for so long. For it to finally pour out, I would just say is really emotional.”

On getting a confidence boost:

“It definitely boosts it a whole lot. Just putting out what I can do. Obviously, I have done it in practice many times, but to actually be able to go back and look at what I have done on film in a real game situation brings a whole lot of confidence knowing that I can put it on the field when I need to.”



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Deacon Hill
Quarterback

On maturing over the course of the season...

"I thought I took a good step forward today. The biggest thing is just continuing to take a step forward next week and the following after that. It's about how I carry myself, just maturing as a player and as a person, and there is a lot that comes with being the starting quarterback at Iowa. Having Spencer and Cade to do that with me has been really nice, and so that is the biggest thing I've seen in myself: just maturing and handling myself better."

On his performance in the second half...

"It's just a rhythm that you get into. I just black out, and it's like, okay, I know what I'm doing. Trust your fundamentals, trust your base and build rhythm. I trusted myself in what I was seeing and trusted what the coaches were telling me."

On the offensive line...

"I think it's how close knit they are. They travel everywhere together. When we get a hotel, they have a huge table for all them to sit together. Like, they're playing games, you walk into one of their hotel rooms and it's just the entire offensive line sitting on the beds and the ground playing games together. It's just a testament to them. They hold each other really well. They've done a great job of being super tight knit and holding each other accountable."

On staying mentally positive...

"I think the biggest thing is just seeing that growth is what gives me confidence, and talking to Spencer and Cade. Talking to them and talking through everything. Then trusting you're here for a reason. So, you trust that, and I think it's just the biggest thing is a stress on myself. And yeah, sometimes it can be tough, you know? Especially before Michigan State, I hadn't played real meaningful snaps of football since high school. I was trying to get back into that rhythm and trying to understand what I want to do. Also, what the team is going to do. Just getting back on the field into that flow I think can be tough at times, but staying level throughout all of it is the biggest thing."



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Nico Ragaini
Wide Receiver

On offensive performance against Rutgers defense:

“This whole year we’ve been working hard. The beginning of the year didn’t go how we wanted it to with the offense. Coach Ferentz and everyone on our team knows that it’s just going to take us getting into rhythm. Today, I think we found that rhythm in our offense and we now we just have to keep going. Can we stack this on to next week? Can we stack it on at practice and continue to work hard every day? Can we get better every single day? We just have to keep focusing on the little things and it’ll take care of itself.”

On the locker room message at halftime:

“I feel like the drive right before half gave us life. We drove the ball down the field. A bunch of guys were making plays to get us down the field. I felt something on that drive; almost like we turned a page even with the mistake at the end. It was something we could build confidence on and that is what we all saw in the second half.”

On the growth of quarterback Deacon Hill:

“When he first got here, I asked him how old he was. He was 19 or 20 at that point. You have to remember these guys are young. He has definitely grown in the past few weeks. I am proud of him and how he played today. That was definitely our best game as a unit and like I said, keep building off of it today.”

On wide receiver Kaleb Brown and his development:

“With Desmond King being our honorary captain today, if you guys don’t know when he played, somebody got hurt, Desmond got thrown out there and never came out again. But that is one thing Coach Ferentz hammers on all the time. For Kaleb to step in when Vines is down, it’s just another Iowa story that happens. I am proud of Kaleb. He works hard every single day. He was locked in the whole week and it was no surprise to me that he made some plays.”

On Coach Ferentz and the team’s perseverance through adversity:

“It definitely has been a crazier year than most for sure. Coach Ferentz has us locked in like he always does. All the guys know that. It’s not always going to be a straight path. It’s going to be a rocky road sometimes. But you have to keep pushing it through. When the ball comes your way, make the play. This is the same Coach Ferentz I’ve known for the past six years. I’ve been hearing the same things over and over. In the beginning of my career, it used to go in one ear out the other ear, but now being older, I realized that when he speaks, it’s like listening to the smartest guy you’re ever going to listen to. He’s always got us ready. He gets emotional all the time, which is cool. That is one thing I will miss for sure as I come to a close in my career.”

