

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Coach Kirk Ferentz Postgame Press Conference

Iowa - 15, Illinois - 13

COACH FERENTZ: Let me start out to say, happy doesn't describe how I feel about our guys. I am proud of the effort everybody put in today and really all season long. It has been a great group of guys to work with -- the players, coaching staff -- and I think that showed today, certainly.

We've gone through some bumps, had some things happen during the course of the year, even this week, losing a key player. But no matter what, the guys stayed together, stay tough, and really care about each other. I think that's demonstrated in the play out there.

Today was no different. Probably a fitting way for us to get this done because there's nothing easy today. Goes right down to the end there, certainly. Again, it points back to the character of the guys we have.

I was actually thinking about this today when I was taking my walk this morning, go back to 1981 when I walked in here not knowing anything about this university. Two guys I meet right off the bat, Andre Tippett, who's a Hall of Fame player, college and unbelievable talent, unbelievable guy to this day, just a die-hard Hawkeye.

And Brad Webb on the other side, they were a tandem in that 3-4 in the defense. Brad is a walk-on from Chicago who ended up being a captain. Same characteristics, talking about a guy who is an NFL Hall of Famer, guy like Brad Webb, who went on to law school and is successful in his business life, all that stuff. That's really what the game's all about. That's 40 some years ago. But that's the beauty of this whole thing.

So really proud of our guys, just great group of guys to work with. Sorry to keep you waiting, but wanted to savor every bit of this with the coaches and players.

Q. You got a game ball from Phil. What were the emotions running through you at that moment and what did that mean to you to share it with the team?



COACH FERENTZ: Wanted to preface that. It's a Michigan State guy giving a ball to the guy to move past a guy from Michigan. A little self-serving on his part, quite frankly.

But I never got into it for that reason. And certainly 23 years ago you could have made some money on that if you placed a friendly wager, not a real bet. Can't do that.

But, again, it goes right back to what I was talking about, the caliber of people that have been through here, had a lot of great coaches come through here and the same thing with the players. It's all about that.

Got Dallas Clark in there. You would have thought he played today in the locker room. So that's 20-something years ago, but that's just the beauty of this whole thing.

Q. You've always talked about when players go through injuries, can be a long, lonely road. Seeing Cade, Cooper, Erick on the sideline, seems they always had a smile on their face when the team's succeeding. No different today, Cooper walking off the field. Like you said, you'd think he was playing in the game. What about your culture and this team has allowed players on the outside to still be fully invested in the team -- and Noah Shannon for that matter not playing either?

COACH FERENTZ: Perspective is a big thing in life. Unfortunately, had to go in July -- didn't have to go, but attended a funeral of one of our former players who died way too young. And then somewhere in camp, another former player who I never got to coach, but missed him by a couple of years, stopped at practice. He just buried his son.

There's a lot of tough things in sports. Losing is hard and injuries are just really hard, especially for the individual affected.

But you've got to keep perspective, too. And it's a game. We're all trying our best. We're all doing our best, hopefully. But the big scheme of things, we're all fortunate to be competing and being part of something like this.

Q. Along those lines, with all the adversity, all the players out, all the kinds of adversity, how much



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sweeter does this make a moment like today?

COACH FERENTZ: One thing I know something about is coaching here. That's probably all I know about frankly. I've got thoughts on beers and coffee and ice cream.

But that's just kind of the way it is here. There's nothing easy, really hasn't been during my 34 years here. Unless you get that rare year like in '02 where things just took off.

But even then, we go over to Indiana and have to pick it off twice in the red zone or we come out of there with a loss. I don't think they had won a game yet. So it's just the nature of the sport.

But this group is really, they've endured a lot. Coming out of State College, things weren't looking too good for us. And then going into our bye week, things weren't looking too good. But the guys don't buy that narrative. They don't buy into all the stuff out there.

And that's really what it gets back to, when you work with quality people that are looking forward, not backwards, and you've got a chance.

Q. With everything that's gone on this season, for you personally, how have you just managed your own emotions?

COACH FERENTZ: It's kind of the same answer. There's things that come up in sports that are tough in life. But what keeps you going are the people you're with every day. That's what I enjoy, being on the practice field, where there's no stuff going on; it's just about football and trying to teach and get better and watch guys improve.

And so that's the beauty of this. That's the purest thing about coaching is being with your players in the meeting room or out there on the field or doing stuff with them just like off away from football but being with them.

It's not like coaching an English class where they have to show up. For football, they come because they want to.

I'll go back. Just watching like Kaleb Johnson hasn't played a lot in the last couple of weeks. I'll tell you he's practiced well every day, kept his chin up and worked forward. To see him break through today is huge, not only for our team but a good moment for him. Hopefully it taught him a lesson to keep working. When you get called on, you take advantage every time opportunity.

Kaleb Brown, same way, he didn't play at all early, I don't think. Looks like he's developing into a good football player. That's the fun of it.

And the offensive line has gained, hopefully gained some confidence and we lost two guys today to injury. Everybody kept playing and defense gave some ground today, some yardage, gave up one drive there. But when we needed it, we had it that last possession, three, four and out. That was the game right there.

Those are the things that are really gratifying, if you will. That goes ahead of what's going on personally with you.

Q. It's been next-man in all year. Could you talk about Kaden Wetjen and the spark he gave you with the punt return?

COACH FERENTZ: No question. I was a little nervous early because of that kick return and then the punt, which was a weird punt. It was like a line drive.

But then he came up, and Wetjen, he's an interesting guy. He's got a good spirit to him. And he's practiced well. So that's a good moment for him, too, talking about like guys maybe haven't done a lot yet. But it's really good. That's got to give him some confidence.

And that's the fun part about this, too, you never know who is going to do what, when. And so it makes it interesting, makes it fun.

Q. Deacon Hill comes in and there probably weren't a whole lot of people expecting him to be the one that leads this team to a division championship?

COACH FERENTZ: Including me (laughter).

Q. Right. And how has it been to sort of coach him and Cade through all that adversity that they experienced even before the season started?

COACH FERENTZ: Cade has done a good job of staying engaged. He is back now, had his surgery and all that stuff. He's staying engaged and been supportive.

Deacon, he gets thrust in there and doesn't have a lot of experience -- you start doing the research, it's like, okay -- but he's so improved, even when he started playing, whatever it's been, six, seven weeks ago. Compared to where he was in August he improved. We've seen improvement.

He made some big plays today. Some that weren't so good but made some big plays today including the run. So you have to give him a lot of credit.

The thing I mentioned to you like last, whatever week it



was, came in the locker room. You can tell from the players you can tell how they feel about somebody. There's a reason why they feel that way.

They're so supportive of him. And everybody's happy and it's probably a little bit representative of our football team, like how did that happen, one of those deals. All of a sudden he's the guy that's quarterbacked, basically whatever it's been, five weeks, five or six -- post-Penn State, whatever it's been. Gotta give him a lot of credit. He's hung in there. I'm sure he's had his down moments, but he's hung in there, kept pushing.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the counterplay and the touchdown there. I was looking at kind of the roster of who was out there, backup center, backup guard. You've got your third team tight end but he's driving somebody into the second, the third level, and your running back is a guy who was on the bench then comes in in a big moment. In some ways, am I being crazy saying that play almost symbolizes your season where you've got all these parts and then counter before this year you didn't really counter?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it's helped us out and we have a good comfort level at this point. Totally, it does. I've got to interject, my favorite fan moment today -- every now and then I'll hear the fans -- I think we were like fourth and one in our territory and everyone is booing because we're punting. Like seriously?

But anyway, I think we were getting booed for running the ball prior to that last play, too. And you just stick with it. You stick with what you're going to do and the fact that you mention all the moving parts. Last week, our big play guys, Zach Ortwerth, who was thinking about the high school prom six months ago. So you just never know what's going to happen. But those guys have just jumped in, done a good job. Addison is unbelievable. A really good young guy and good player. And that run, that was perfect. That's how this team's worked.

Q. The TV cameras caught you and Brian in an embrace after the game. Talk to us about what you guys said to each other in that moment, or what this game was like knowing this is the last time you had together at Kinnick.

COACH FERENTZ: This was Senior Day today, his last day, so there was some sentimental value to that, certainly.

So glad it turned out the way it did. I was proud of him. He's been admirable in the way he's handled a very tough situation. And I'm not quite sure I know how he's done it but I'm really proud of him as a dad. And can't say enough

about that. But I do try to keep things separate.

I'm really proud of him as a head coach. I think we've got a great staff here of guys that care about the right things and think about Phil Parker been here 25 years now.

In this environment of coaching, good luck finding -- he's had two jobs now in his career. So there aren't many guys smart enough to know they've got a good thing. Phil has and what a job he's done. But we've got really good guys on our staff. Just really proud of all of them.

Q. Along the same lines, we don't get to talk to Brian today. But if he were here, you as his father, like what would he say about what this means to him, do you think?

COACH FERENTZ: Anytime you can be a champion, if you can say champion, that's a good thing. There's more goals out there to be had. Nothing will be easy.

But I think we're all thinking the same thing here. It goes back to the players. That's why we do this. And just so happy for these guys, what they've endured and gone through. And they know what's going on, too. But they're on board. And again they've never flinched, including today. It would have been easy today. But everybody stayed the course, same thing last week, kept pressing and some good things have happened. It's all you can ask for in life, just straight ahead and see what comes out of it, and if we come up short today, we'd go back to work on tomorrow and see what we can do about the next one and we'll still do that.

But I did encourage the guys maybe to break the 24-hour rule this time, we'll make a small exception.

Q. Can you update some of the injuries like along the offensive line with Logan and Rusty and those guys.

COACH FERENTZ: Again, credit goes to Tyler Elsbury. Anything there, that's a good story there. He got thrust into it a couple weeks ago. Me personally watching him, I think the only thing he's lacked for maybe at least a year, maybe longer, is confidence. I'm not sure he believes in himself. That's the phenomenon in the sports stuff.

After the way he's played the last couple of weeks, he should be confident as hell. You can't give that to somebody, just like you can't give experience. It's not that he hasn't been working hard, but somewhere in the recesses of his mind he didn't believe he could do it. That's my theory. I can't prove that.

But he should know now. Like he's played really well in



three pivotal games for us and that's the fun part about this and he'll be a guy that plays well for us moving forward. Sometimes good things come out of tough situations like that. It's tough when you lose a good player like Logan Jones. But that's the beauty of it all.



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Iowa 15, Illinois 13

Player Quotes

Kinnick Stadium / Nov. 18, 2023

Kaleb Brown

Wide Receiver

On what it means to be headed to the Big Ten Championship:

"This means a whole lot. What we just had in the locker room was crazy. I wish you all could have been there honestly. To see the improvement of the guys next to me, even in myself – to step up and be the guy that everybody needs me to be. This has been so exciting. I'm out of breath just coming from the locker room."

On his season coming full circle:

"It's crazy to think about. Even with what just happened. Nobody really expected that. Just to hold patience like that and believing it will come around for us. We have faith in that and actually seeing it come forward; words can't explain how exciting it is."

On the emotion in the locker room:

"It was super emotional. We gave Coach (Ferentz) the game ball. It was something I'm going to remember forever. He said he was going to talk about us ten years from now. It was something great to be a part of and to be able to take pictures with the guys next to me."

On the chipiness and toughness of the game:

"It was a football game, that's for sure. It was definitely about the way we responded to the whole game. It came down to the effort and toughness and was something we had to stick with the entire time."



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Deacon Hill
Quarterback

On emotions after the game:

"I think it exploded a little. You try and stay level throughout the whole game and not let your emotions get to you. Feel whatever you need to feel after the game. That is something that coaches taught me, and it has been really helpful. So after the game, you know, it's going to explode a little bit."

On adversity:

"You know, not just individually, but as a team, we have gone through a lot this year with injuries and whatever else. I think it just shows the resiliency of this team and how determined everybody is. We just keep pushing forward each and every day..."

It has got to be the story of our season. Just keep punching forward each and every play, each and every day. Keep moving forward, one step in front of the other. I think we did that today. We knew at some point one was going to break, and we just couldn't let up. We couldn't take our foot off the gas. You know, no matter the outcome of what that drive was, we knew that we had to keep pushing forward each and every play."

On winning and Offensive Coordinator Brian Ferentz:

"It is awesome, the way things are, and this being his last game in Kinnick. I couldn't be happier for the guy. I haven't been this grateful to play for a coach in my whole life. I am extremely grateful to play for him. I love that guy to death. He puts me in some good spots. He has taught me a lot so far."

On Head Coach Kirk Ferentz receiving the game ball:

"So, we couldn't find the ball. It took us like five minutes to get one. Then we finally gave it to him. Coach Parker gave it to him, and they had a big hug. Everybody was cheering, water was flying, it was just an awesome moment for him"



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Kaleb Johnson

Running back

On his 30-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter:

"I saw green grass and just ran. That is my thing, when I see green grass I run. I saw green grass, took off running and scored... It was just amazing, man, being back [in the end zone]... I was just reading the safety right there, whether I should press up and go in or go out. I pressed him, went outside and used my speed."

On his first down run to seal the win:

"I said in my head, let's get this first down and run with efficiency. I saw a little crease and just hit."

On staying patient the past few weeks:

"Focusing on the little things and grinding it out, being patient. I knew opportunities were going to come up, so I just had to be patient. When my time comes, take the opportunity and use it to my advantage."

On playing for the senior class and the postgame celebration:

"Especially the seniors. This is their last time out there. For me to do that for them, it's just my gift for them when they lift. So, it's my gift, scoring a touchdown for you guys. We won it in Kinnick... It was an awesome moment for us, and especially for Coach Brian [Ferentz]. It was a really important moment for us, because we knew that was his last time in Kinnick. We just hugged him out and gave him love. It was a little special moment we had all together. We won't ever forget that."

On feelings after clinching the Big Ten West:

"It feels amazing. I feel like I did something valuable for the team. All I can do is just thank everybody for believing in me and giving me a shot. All I could do is sit back and be patient, and that is what I did tonight."

On quarterback Deacon Hill:

"It has just been amazing seeing him progress. He was at Wisconsin last year and he didn't really get a lot of playing time. He didn't get a lot of playing time when he first got here. For Cade [McNamara] to get hurt was kind of a devastating moment, but it was an opportunity for him. It was a matter of what do you do. I feel like when he has been in the backfield, he has shown a lot of progression. I can see how he loves football. He is in the room all day everyday getting better. I believe in him completely now. He is in his game now."



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Joe Evans
Defensive End

On winning the division and what separates this team:

"I'm going to get super emotional up here. We have battled so much adversity and I am just so proud of every single person in that locker room -- players, coaches, every single person, that's why it just means more. I have played on some really great teams. This group battled adversity. We just keep fighting. We just keep coming and coming. I can't say it enough. I am so proud of these guys. I wish you could see what I see during the week; whether it be on the practice field or just how these guys battle and fight.

"I am so happy I came back for my sixth year because I am able to witness this."

On going from walk-on to team captain in 2023:

"That means the world to me. I sat down with Coach Braithwaite and we were getting teary eyed in there. I had a long conversation on whether I come back or not and I remember going into Coach Braithwaite's office probably five times to have these conversations.

My number one goal was to be a team captain and I shared that with Coach Braithwaite, I shared that with my parents, I shared that with Coach Ferentz. For me, that is earned and not given. So being able to be a team captain and be a Big Ten West champion feels so good. Like I said, being a team captain is my biggest accomplishment here and my biggest accomplishment in life. I'm a walk-on, I'm not supposed to be here. Just being able to lead them out on the field and lead them to a Big Ten West Championship is something that I'll be talking about for the rest of my life."



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Jay Higgins
Linebacker

On the season:

"This teams been through so much this season, and this is a taste into how we have stayed together in the locker room. We are coached by a great head coach and we just did a great job staying together this year. Guys could've separated but that never happened."

On clinching a Big Ten Championship bid:

"It defineltly feels good to be able to go home. I have a lot of family there. They are probably going to start asking for tickets tonight. I will probably end up 30 short. I'm just excited for this team. We have played hard. We have pushed ourselves, and now we have oppurtunities like this. Winning the Big Ten Championship has been a goal since day one. Last year, after a good bowl game win, we understood what our goals were, and that is winning the championship."

On giving Coach Ferentz the game ball and emotions in the locker room:

"You can just feel how much time he puts into it. It means so much to him. He loves the game of football. He loves his players. He loves his coaches. You can probably see that. We can see that, and I defineitly see that everyday. The players get a lot of credit, but moments like that, it is good the coaches get recognized."

On facing adversity this season:

"We tried to stay focused. We tried to take care of the game. When you are hit with so many obstacles like that, it is hard to not feel bad for yourself. I feel like our main focus at the end of the day is figuring out a way to win games. You can really rally a team. We have a lot of guys that only care about winning a game and leaving it all out there. It's been a lot of ups and downs, but we've done a good job at staying together, and that's what keeps up moving forward."

On the defense forcing 13 pass breakups:

"We understood that the loss of Cooper would change their game plan. We understood they were getting the ball out of the quarterback's hands as soon as possible. Coach Parker did a great job of putting us in the right position. You can tell their game plan changed, and we did a great job of adapting."

On Noah Shannon's honorary captain recognition:

"His situation is unfortunatnte, obviously, but it was great seeing the crowd rally around him. Getting your season taken away from you and continuing to stay with the program, I don't think a lot of guys would do that. Having to come into the facility and watch other guys do what you love, I can only imagine how hard that is. He showed true character throughout this process and never complained. He always helps the team and puts us first."



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Logan Lee
Defensive Lineman

On the team:

"We have guys that you can trust, depend on and lean on in times of struggle and in times of celebration. We have been blessed with the group that we put together, and the coaching staff that was put together. Everyone's important but it starts to mean a little bit more towards the end of the season."

On Senior Day emotions:

"I have had an amazing support system throughout my whole life. My wife, my parents and my whole family have just been there in every stage of my life, and I can't say how much they mean to me. I have 120 folks out at the tailgate now waiting to celebrate this with me too."

On team progression throughout the season:

"We have grown so much since the start of the season because the group has suffered together. There has been a lot of adversity that we have had to face and it has been a great opportunity for us to tighten up and be able to lean on one another and trust each other in every aspect."