

TransPerfect Music City Bowl: Iowa vs Kentucky

Saturday, December 31, 2022

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Nissan Stadium

Iowa Hawkeyes

Head Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference

Iowa-21, Kentucky-0

THE MODERATOR: Coach Ferentz will make a couple of remarks and then we'll open it up for questions.

KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Obviously, really happy for our team. It was a great team victory today and just really proud of them.

You know, the work that they've done this entire month and then obviously they did a great job down here in Nashville and had a great experience. Appreciative of Scott and everybody with the Transparent Bowl. It's been absolutely fantastic. I said transparent again. TransPerfect. I'll get that right. Son of a bitch.

No, just really happy for our guys. Just really happy for our guys. Especially our seniors. What a way to send them off. It's been a great group, and I can't thank them enough for all they've done.

Each and every one of these guys has really embodied what it means to be a Hawkeye. You talk about the guys that are seniors, the senior captains, or a kid like Tommy Hartlieb, Dallas Craddieth, you know, big tackle on special teams. Just a really special group.

Bowl games are a little bittersweet because of that. You have to say goodbye to those guys, but just couldn't be more proud.

Then the other aspect obviously a chance for some younger players to step up and do some things. You know, one of the fun things with keep coaching about a goal game, you watch younger guys develop and grow. Saw a lot of that during the course of this past four weeks.

You know, coincidentally Jaz Patterson took it there at the end and had a couple of good runs. He is a young guy who just quietly has been grabbing opportunities and doing



a great job.

You talk about Cooper. Obviously, he had a great game. Joe Labas might be as valuable as Cooper just in the fact that he didn't make any critical mistakes out there, and that's easier said than done. You know, just proud of the way he handled things and got thrown into it pretty suddenly.

So, you know, just happy about the younger guys' development. Obviously, we have a big leadership void. I think as much as anything I think this group of seniors, the contributions they've made leadership-wise just invaluable. Just happy about everything on that front.

And then, unfortunately, I have some sad and tragic information to share with you. Jack Campbell's grandfather passed away last night. Was involved in an accident here. Mr. Smith, I can just tell you this from personal experience, had a really big influence on Jack's entire life. He was very close with him, helped parent him.

I know he was here to cheer on his grandson. Very, very proud of Jack, and just has a great mutual relationship, the two of them had. Our hearts are certainly with the entire family, Jack and his entire family, as they grieve. It's tough to deal with (choked up).

I know he was a great influence on Jack and a great Hawkeye on top of it, and really appreciative of that. Sorry to drop that on you, but transitioning to questions.

Q. Coach, can you talk about that two pick-6s and how important they were today?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, huge. We knew what we were up against. In some ways both of us were looking in the mirror a little bit. Stronger more veteran on defense, both teams. For us playing clean football offensively is a starting point. I was confident Joe could do some things and get some things going.

Defensively certainly that was going to be paramount, and we've ridden that all season long. You never count on the touchdowns, but the field position part. And then the third

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ingredient was our special teams play.

I joked with Tory. We should have made him a captain earlier, I guess, but he couldn't have had a better game. He punted great, and it really impacted the field position.

Then if you give our defense a chance, they might do some good things, and both great plays. Cooper is hardly a veteran, but he has played. And then for X to get that one, that was great for him in his first start too. So you get some young guys getting some valuable experience and having a great experience.

Q. Amplifying on Tory, can you begin to explain what a difference maker he has been?

KIRK FERENTZ: He has been outstanding. Watching the growth over three years is probably the neater part, and that's one of the fun parts about coaching. You know, had a couple of games where he wasn't as sharp. I don't know if I have seen him sharper than what I saw today. He was on it. Just on it every time.

We had great respect for their returners, both on kickoff and then also the punt. So that was something we were really are focused on. Especially No. 2. That's why Dallas is tackling, and that kickoff was so good.

Yeah, but Tory's work is just -- a lot of people it's not that big of a deal, but just in the second half I think it was, you know, we punted down there and got the ball back. We gained 20 yards field position. It was the first second-possession in the third quarter.

So all those little things that aren't very interesting to people make a big difference in games, and then if you have a good defense, it gives you a chance.

Q. On Xavier's pick-6, it looked like it switched from more of a cover-three look as opposed to more of a cover-four. Do you think that impacted the play at all? And then, of course, what he was able to do once he caught it, it seems to show what he is capable of doing.

KIRK FERENTZ: We play mostly zone, and hopefully not too obvious with what we're doing. Yeah, it was a good heads-up play. Again, Bowe both teams were playing with new quarterbacks, so not making those critical errors was big. And then our guys capitalized the ball. It sailed a little bit, and he was there. Then forever it seems like.

Our guys have done a good job. We do a good job of turnovers and making them offensive opportunities, if you will, and that's coached. Those guys know where to go,

where to get. Did a nice job of getting behind his blockers. Our guys saw hustle when there is a turnover. They're trying to make it more than just getting possession. It's good coaching.

Our defensive staff I think does a great job. Flipping over to the offensive staff too, I think, again, we knew our challenges here, and to navigate it the way we want to was really -- it was a good effort by all three phases.

Q. How much have you seen Xavier grow over these last few months?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not saying he's Cooper, but if you remember, Cooper was not a household name a year ago. At least in November. So, again, that's what we get to watch is you watch guys get confidence. The world we're living in now, it's just going to happen sooner than it used to.

I used to redshirt guys so frequently, but those days are gone. You watch him doing things on special teams, and that's usually where especially with the perimeter guys, you start getting a good feel about a guy. He has been doing that. He has been -- he is attentive. He has a great attitude and works hard, and that goes back to January when he showed up.

So for him to get his first experience, I just asked him if he was nervous. I didn't want to talk to him before the game. He said, no. That's what he came here for, to play. So it was really good to see him step in there.

And Koen Entringer has done a nice job too. He had an injury in December otherwise he would have been in here a little bit too.

You have three guys back there. You don't want to lose a guy. Kaevon went here, but good to see younger guys step up and go.

Q. Seven straight seasons, not counting the COVID year, that you have won at least eight games. What does that mean to you?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll factor in COVID too because it was well over 61% or whatever percent that is. Yeah, I think it's significant. Winning in college football is not easy. I think it's significant if you look at the other four teams that have done it.

Oklahoma dropped out. It was six coming into the year. We're still there, and those other teams, you don't see us recruiting against them too often.

So it just says a lot about our players. Like I said, these seniors, you know, feel an obligation to the program to uphold the standard, and that's what the game is all about. Guys getting that message. It's pretty simple, but it's hard when you have 120 guys show up every day with a good attitude and put it on a stage working. Those are habits that will really help them down the road, whatever they do professionally, being a parent, being somebody that's a member of a team in a company, a school, whatever you are doing. It's a beautiful part about football.

Q. Sam said the more you put into the program, the more you get out of it. How would you kind of accentuate what he means by that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I agree. Pretty good example is the three guys that -- I don't know if Riley was here, but the three senior captains. And Kaevon same way, and then Tory.

That's life, though. It's you get what you get. What you give, you get it back. Typically. Sometimes it takes a while, but you get it back, and I've always believed that, I guess.

Q. What did you see from Joe Labas in his first career start?

KIRK FERENTZ: If you had seen him two weeks ago, I'll get in trouble again. I got in trouble last year with this one, but if you saw him two weeks ago, whoa. The first couple of weeks were really bumpy, but last week he settled down a little bit. Just an example, teamwork and being a good teammate.

Petras was with him every play, and Carson had to get in the huddle with him every play even last week. So just guys helping each other out. His growth, that's growth he wouldn't have gotten until the opportunity opened up. He had a great attitude. He has really worked hard. I thought he did a really good job today.

I don't mind telling you, we were worried about the 25-second clock. Let's just start there. Getting the ball snapped before that. I don't know how close you watched pregame, but we had a center/quarterback exchange, of course, on the first play. That stuff isn't really reassuring sometimes.

He played with poise out there, and he has a little juice to him too, so that's fun to see.

Q. Kirk, we've talked rightfully so about Jack Campbell. But Riley Moss is a guy that maybe wasn't going to come back. He ended up coming back. I

guess I saw the emotional moment you two had on stage, but what has Riley Moss meant to you and the program?

KIRK FERENTZ: So, yeah, last year, whatever, December or whatever, it was when we had that little break and the guys came back. Both within, like, five minutes of each other, Campbell and Laporta walk in my office and say, I'm back for next year, we're not going anywhere. Great.

Riley took it into January, and I really didn't think he would come back, but I think his decision was well thought out. I think he had great guidance from his family.

This year, no questionably has helped him in his future. He would love to play in the NFL. My big concern with him coming back, and I've told the NFL people this, is, okay, you get a guy back for that year maybe you're not counting on, so what's it going to be like? First guy out there on the field every day in spring ball and worked his tail off every day. That's how he does things.

Doing the pregame thing yesterday Louis Riddick just commented about how impressed he was, and Louis played defensive back. We were together in Cleveland.

Again, it's that example of a guy coming back with the right attitude and just building on. I've always believed players improve. Good players improve if they have the right attitude.

That's what you are talking about with Riley. What a great guy. That's the fun part about football.

Q. New quarterbacks on both sides, but for your defense as good as they've played all year to cap this off with a shut-out, the first in this bowl's history, how is that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not the smartest guy in the world, but one thing I've learned, if they can't score, you're not going to lose. I know that.

If we could have written the script today, it was perfect. Just really happy. Again, it's a testament to the way our guys prepare and just the work that they put in beyond the practice field. Those guys are really committed to it, and there's a standard. It's great to see. I'm just really proud of those guys.

Q. I've been covering your team for about the past four seasons, and I never have seen you emotional like that when you hugged your players up on the podium and get fears tears in your eyes. Can you describe the emotions you were feeling at that moment?



KIRK FERENTZ: It's probably amplified a little bit. The things I talked about in December here, all this stuff going on that just doesn't make sense in college football, quite frankly. That's a whole discussion for a different day. There's a lot of things that frustrate you a little bit or you wonder, you know, what the hell is going on?

But the single best part about coaching is being with the guys. When you have guys like we've got, that's the best part of the day. I quit golfing 30 years ago, thank God for everybody. If I was good at golf and liked golf, that would be like golfing, right, but I don't golf, so I would rather be around our players.

Again, you have guys that are buying in and just focussed on the right things. That's what makes it fun. Makes it really valuable.

Q. Unless I missed something, Van Nuys didn't play in the first quarter. Was there any reason for that? And then do you think he will be back next year?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. Time will tell. No major reason, and time will tell. We'll see. Hope so. Hope a lot of guys are back.

Q. Castro has built a reputation of being a sure tackler, but today he had some really nice plays in pass coverage. How would you describe how he has --

KIRK FERENTZ: They tested him. They went after him, and I thought he played great. That guy was fast, the guy he was covering.

So we talked about X stepping in. Same thing with Sebastian. He played a lot of snaps all season, but he just keeps improving. He is a tough, hard-nosed guy, and he cares and works hard. So that was a tough matchup, but I thought he played well. He was a factor in the game certainly, and it's just that next man in, next man up concept. Again, the guys buy into it.

Q. That catch that Sam had and he broke six different tackles, it was kind of like TJ a few years ago. This is probably even better I think to put you in a scoring position. How do you sum up a play like that just by watching it?

KIRK FERENTZ: He is all football player. He was that way -- I tell the NFL guys, when he came here, he was pretty good at receiving and that kind of stuff. Never blocked.

But the guy is just all football player. He truly loves the

game. He loves competition, and he loves doing it with a bunch of good guys.

So going back to him, you get some of these guys, these guys are pretty rare. This group is pretty rare. Sam is right there. I mean, he is just unbelievable. What a football player he is.

You mentioned TJ. That was the biggest play in the game back in '18 I guess it would have been, right? '18. The one-yard pass that he took down because, you know, we're kind of up against it there. Shifted field position, and then made them go the long field. That was a huge play in that game.

I actually said last night when I told him, I said, you know, biggest play -- biggest pass play in the Orange Bowl was Tony caught about a three-yard little in-and-out and took it 50 or whatever it was. That's football sometimes. To have guys like Tony, TJ, or Sam, and that's how good things happen.

Yeah, what a good story he is, and then it was fitting that Luke finished it off because, boy, has he become a good football player.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

KIRK FERENTZ: Appreciate it, thank you.

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Sam Laporta

Cooper DeJean

Joe Labas

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Over the last four years a lot of guys in that locker room have worked their butts off, and I think they see kind of those accomplishments and the success precede that. Yeah, it's just a really emotional day, and glad to go out on top.

Q. What was it like playing quarterback?

SAM LAPORTA: Two carries, I guess, but it was all right. Yeah, felt comfortable back there. I've been in the huddle for probably a couple of thousand play calls. It's different when you are giving the play call and not receiving it. Who knows?

Q. What was your reaction? Was it Kirk that told you you were going to be doing that or Brian?

SAM LAPORTA: Brian. It kind of started off as an emergency thing. Hey, we might throw you go in there as a Wildcat, let you tote the rock, maybe carry it too. A couple of carries, not too bad.

Q. Did you lobby to throw the ball?

SAM LAPORTA: What about throwing the ball?

Q. Did you lobby to throw the ball?

SAM LAPORTA: I was telling him my shoulder was warm. It was loose, but I don't know. We weren't out there long enough, I guess, to get a ball in the air.

Q. At a minimum I think it was six tackles on that passing -- or on that pass, that 27-yarder. What kind of went through your mind? What goes through your mind now trying to think about the whole play in its entirety?

SAM LAPORTA: I just saw a lot of blue jerseys, and I don't know. I couldn't explain it. You tell me it's only 27 yards. That's crazy to me because I felt like I was running for, like, 20 seconds. It was crazy (laughing).

But I don't know. Just like backyard football almost. Don't let one guy bring you down. Get as many as it takes, yeah.

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SAM LAPORTA: Crazy day. A lot of fond memories were made today. Just great being a part of this program. A lot of great people. Yeah, a lot of fond memories. Coop.

COOPER DEJEAN: I want to start off by saying thank you to guys like Sam, all these seniors. It was good to send these guys out on a high note. They've given so much to this program. They've been great leaders all year, so it was good to get that one last win for them.

JOE LABAS: I thought it was a great team win. Especially to get the win for the seniors. Like Coop said, it was just a great team win.

SAM LAPORTA: Broadway Joe. Broadway Joe, MVP Coop. What does that make me?

Q. Question for you, Sam. Does this kind of put it all into context for you as far as deciding to play in this game, to have these feelings and to wear the hats and enjoy the moment, everything?

SAM LAPORTA: I mean, you should have seen me coming off the field. I was crying like a little baby. Just really emotional. You pour a lot into this program. I said this a couple of weeks ago, but the more you put it in, the more it gives back to you.

I feel like it's the opposite, like, when you are being recruited. What can this program, what can this team do for me? I think that's the exact opposite once you actually get there. The more you invest, the more the program will do for you.

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Q. Cooper, you can you talk about your interception and what it means to win the MVP of the bowl game?

COOPER DEJEAN: Yeah, I think winning MVP, I think it's more of a team award, you know, because without these guys on the defense I couldn't do what I was able to do.

You know, getting that pick, those guys were pressuring the quarterback all game. Same with Xavier's pick. A lot of credit to the guys up front and everybody else on the defense, so...

Q. Joe, I think it was three completions for ten-plus yards. How much of a confidence boost was it to get out there and right away get those results?

JOE LABAS: Yeah, it was huge. I was obviously a little nervous at first, but to get those in, it really helped a lot.

Q. Was there anybody who had kind of the best wisdom for you as you're going into your first career start?

JOE LABAS: Well, Spencer Petras, for sure. He has helped me out a lot. Not only just this month and the bowl prep, but throughout the entire season and even last year, you know. He has been a big part of my preparation for this game, so I appreciate him.

Q. Sam, you guys talked a lot about leaving the jersey in a better place. I guess, can you kind of explain what it means for you seniors to finish with a win and then also to see so many young guys, like Joe and Cooper and Xavier, kind of have these moments in the game knowing what could be ahead for them in the future?

SAM LAPORTA: Yeah. That's one of our mottos. Leave the jersey in a better place. I sure hope I did that.

I know the program is in great hands. These young guys are really going to -- they're going to spring forward. I'm really excited to continue to be a part of this program and just -- yeah, like I said, just overwhelming today. A lot of stuff going on. Man, I loved every second of it today.

Q. You lost to this team to start 2022, and now you get a chance to get revenge?

SAM LAPORTA: It's a little revenge game. Every game is important. Especially, like, when I wasn't out there for senior day, I don't know, it just kind of left a bad taste in my mouth. I wanted done out there one more time and to be with my guys.

So, yeah, I guess there was a little extra meaning today, but still just getting one more opportunity to compete with the 2022 team. It was phenomenal. And, like I said, I cherished every second of it.

Q. Joe, besides winning, obviously, did you get done what you wanted to get done?

JOE LABAS: You know, ultimately my focus was on getting the win. That was it.

Going out there, everything was kind of my first rodeo obviously, so I was just kind of focused on getting the win. That's pretty much it, and we got the win.

Q. Considering turnovers, is this something that was, I'm guessing yes, but in the front of your mind for the last few weeks, ball protection?

JOE LABAS: Yeah, ball security was huge for us, not turning the ball over on offense. And we didn't do that, so that was huge.

Q. Joe, anything that surprised you once you kind of got out there and the bullets were flying?

JOE LABAS: Just getting hit for the first time in a couple of years. Yeah, that for sure kind of took me back. I was, like, okay, this is how it feels, you know. You know, yeah, that was something.

Q. Cooper, the fact that you were knocked out of a Nebraska game early, I mean, how rewarding was it to come out with this type of performance? Did it provide more motivation just because you didn't get to play in the last game?

COOPER DEJEAN: Yeah, I missed it a lot. Being on the sidelines watching the guys go to battle, it's a lot different than being in it. So I'm glad I was able to be out there today.

It was kind of in the back of my head what happened last few weeks ago I guess, so it was good to be back out there with these guys. I'm glad we got the win today.

Q. A lot of the plays that really mattered as well were on special teams. For everybody, but being able to pin Kentucky back I think at the 2 on one play and another one where you had fielding the ball at your 5, but you have, like, 35-yard punt return. How instrumental do you think that was and to be able to make the defensive plays by what you were able to do on special teams?

COOPER DEJEAN: Yeah, we stress the importance of special teams in this game and every game a lot. You know, when you have No. 9 back there throwing darts down the field, it makes it pretty easy on the gunners to go down there and tackle the return.

We gave up one big return there. But other than that, I think special teams did their job for the most part today.

Q. Cooper, Sebastian played probably his best football of his career. Xavier got his first start, had a pick-6. How would you assess the future of the secondary and just kind of recap what you were able to do today?

COOPER DEJEAN: I think we've got a lot of talent in our DB room. I think we played well today. Obviously, there's always things you can continue to improve on, and you see that stuff that those guys are doing in the games and practice all the time. You know, they've been making those plays for a while now, and they made the most of it today.

Xavier getting his first start and Stro just playing ball like he knows how to play, so it was really good. Really good team unit and all around, an all-around victory.

Q. Sam, Brian Ferentz said you are the best player he has coached. He has coached NFL guys, Pro Bowl guys in the NFL, but he said that about you yesterday. What does that mean to you to have one of your coaches say that?

SAM LAPORTA: Yeah, Brian really supported me and believed in me. I came in as a receiver. I had never even put my hand to the ground.

I was taking baby steps at first, and he was always there supporting me, giving me advice. Really shaped me into the player I am today. I owe him a lot of thanks. He is a damn good coach.

I don't care what anybody says about that man. Yeah, I owe him a lot. He is a great dude, great friend, and a great coach.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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Tory Taylor

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TORY TAYLOR: It was pretty fun, wasn't it?

Q. I think you had six punts inside the 15 yard line. Did today feel like a really good day for you punting? Do you feel like everything you were wanting to accomplish you did, and you felt good physically, all that sort of thing?

TORY TAYLOR: I think to answer that question, I was kind of joking around with a couple of the guys. I'm, like, it's January tomorrow. Is this what it's like in the SEC every time? It's kind of funny how the weather can just play a really big role I guess in your mindset.

I know there's not really anything that you can do in terms of that, but when the weather is nice, it certainly gives you a better degree of confidence. Yeah, it was just a good day overall, and it was really happy with my performance because I feel like this year I've really probably let myself down and the team down in a couple of games, so it was kind of just good to go back out there and just let loose and have fun.

Q. DeJean gave you give for his success. How important is it for you as a punter to have --

TORY TAYLOR: It's Cooper DeJean. He is good at everything, honestly. He is probably good at Australian football, and he has never played it.

Really lucky to have guys like him and Jamison Heinz and Terry Roberts who is obviously no longer with us. Really grateful for those guys this year and last year, and Deavin Hilson stepped in this year as well, and Koen Entringer, and the rest of the punt unit. I've been with Turner Pallissard and part Louis Stec for a couple of years now, and there's a lot of guys on the punt unit that I've had since I've got here and really grateful.

I probably said it a few times in the past. Those guys on the punt unit want to be on the punt unit, and that's something that we really cherish a lot here at Iowa, just the impact of special teams.

But to go back to your original question, really lucky to have someone like Cooper DeJean. You guys can see what he can do when he is on the field. Really happy to have him on the punt unit, and moving forward I hope he certainly stays.

Q. Before the game a bunch of kids were standing behind you, and they were just oohing and awing. I don't know if that's specifically about you or if it's just watching a punter kick the ball like you do. What's that like gathering a crowd of young players watching are you?

TORY TAYLOR: They certainly don't have any idea who I am. I know that's for sure. They were kind of just screaming at "9, 9, Taylor, Taylor." You could see even when Nick Phelps, the backup punter was hitting a few nice ones, you could tell that they were pretty impressed there. Maybe they haven't seen that before, but yeah, it's all good fun. I'm glad they had a good time.

Q. You said that you haven't had the season you wanted to have, but it would seem like 99% of the punters would trade you seasons. Is that just who you are?

TORY TAYLOR: Yeah. I feel like I put pretty high expectations on myself, but, I mean, you look at the Illinois game, I didn't really perform that well.

There was probably just kind of that middle pack. I mean, Purdue wasn't a bad game, but just feel like I wasn't really hitting the balls that I wanted to be hitting towards the end of the year. And although some of them have a good result, it's more so -- I know I sound a bit cliché. It's not necessarily about the process, but if I'm not hitting the balls I want to be hitting, it becomes a bit frustrating.

Although a couple of results here or there went well, but

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you kind of say from a statistic point of view I had the inside 20s, but yardage certainly dropped towards the end of the year.

But, I mean, like I kind of opened with, weather certainly plays -- certainly it makes life a lot more difficult. Minnesota was probably the coldest place I've ever been in my life. To be out in that weather for that long, it's just ridiculous. It's not like you are just running from your house to the car in that sort of cold. You're kind of out there. Couldn't feel my hands or toes or anything like that (laughing).

Yeah, that was certainly an experience in itself. I think it was -17 degrees Celsius or whatever that is in Fahrenheit or whatever you use here. I'm really not too sure.

Yeah, it was certainly cold, but I love it just because, I mean, the Big Ten, that's where I feel like specialists can really, really -- if you can show that you can perform, it really goes a long way. Yeah, I guess it would be nice kind of punting in this sort of weather every week, but you don't really get that in the Big Ten.

Q. You're a captain today.

TORY TAYLOR: Yeah.

Q. What did that mean to you?

TORY TAYLOR: I mean, it means a lot because I feel like the greatest achievement you can have is by being voted in by your peers. Each year each week during the season everyone votes on captain, and just to be voted in for the bowl game really just meant a lot to me because, yeah, they're the ones that I play for, my teammates.

It really had nothing to do with the coaches or anything like that. So to be voted in by the players that I go out there every day, and this started back in January. To get voted in by them, it's a pleasure. I hope they know every time I step foot on the field, I just never wanted to let them down.

To answer your question, yeah, it was just I guess a really big moment for me, and probably one of my greatest ever achievements was being voted captain. I really am not just saying that. I really mean it.

Q. First Team All-American, 25 years old. Seems like it be a smart move, or a move maybe you consider going to the NFL. Do you know what you are doing yet?

TORY TAYLOR: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I've had those conversations with a lot of the coaches and my parents

and family. Yeah, just kind of came back. Although the time is probably right to leave, it was just kind of in my best interest.

Yeah, so I will be coming back next year. Yeah, just really looking forward. It's going to be a special year. We've kind of got a young group. Yeah, obviously bringing in a pretty special quarterback and pretty big couple of transfers. I really think this team can go far, and I just really want to be a part of it.

There's a couple of things that I really want to tweak with my game, so to answer your question, had you asked me a month ago, I was probably kind of, I guess, 85/15 or 80/20 towards leaving, but there's just no harm done coming back.

Yeah, really excited. Yeah, it's going to be another great year, and I feel like from a specialist point of view there's going to be no one better than myself, Luke, and Drew. We're really excited moving forward, and I really mean that.

Thanks, guys. Appreciate it. See you next year.

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Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Nissan Stadium

Iowa Hawkeyes

Xavier Nwankpa

Press Conference



Iowa-21, Kentucky-0

Q. You enjoyed it?

XAVIER NWANKPA: Yeah, for sure.

Q. Who did you see on the pick-6?

XAVIER NWANKPA: I saw the ball in the air and a chance to go get it. I really blacked out after that and just ran in the end zone. Celebrated with my teammates. It was a special moment.

Q. (Inaudible) I saw you kind of play the deep middle.

XAVIER NWANKPA: Yeah, we rolled back to cover-three at that point.

Q. Just an overthrow, and you were in the right spot?

XAVIER NWANKPA: Right place, right time.

Q. How would you grade your own performance?

XAVIER NWANKPA: I would probably give myself a B. There were a couple of mistakes I made, and always room for improvement, so just focusing in on getting back after the new year.

Q. What was the moment like when you found out that you were going to be starting?

XAVIER NWANKPA: It was pretty crazy. Leading up I was repping with the ones once Kaevon announced he was going to the draft. I was getting repps, getting used to everything, getting used to the speed, so helped me play to this moment now.

Q. Phil Parker pointed to you specifically about making big strides over the last few weeks in bowl

prep. How would you assess your growth, especially over the past couple of weeks?

XAVIER NWANKPA: That was really my focus, I was trying to get better every day. Working out two positions. I really played free throughout the year. So playing strong and just learning from the people around me. Especially Kaevon. He just helped me, helped guide me up there.

Q. What did it mean to you to make that type of play?

XAVIER NWANKPA: It really meant a lot. The team has been pushing me, helping me grow, so really making that play helped show what they've done for me and helped me grow.

Q. How does that kind of help give you a positive feeling out of your freshman year at Iowa? You didn't play a ton of regular snaps, but this game had to mean a lot for you going forward.

XAVIER NWANKPA: Oh, for sure. Definitely it set the bar for me where I have to go, where I have to improve from, so just keep making plays, having fun throughout the spring and getting ready for next fall.

Q. In the game you were down hitting in the box. You weren't exactly standing back letting everybody do things. Then I think there was one situation where they head-butted you out on the sideline and did no-call or whatever. What was kind of going through your mind? Hey, I'm going to make you pay for that?

XAVIER NWANKPA: For sure. Really, like, it was a little chippy at times. It's whatever. It's football. Go out there and have fun, make plays. Really that wasn't really my focus. I was just focused on going to the next play making a play and trying to win the game.

Q. Were you excited about the secondary you have coming back next year? You think about Cooper and Jermari and Sebastian?

XAVIER NWANKPA: For sure. We really have a chance. We really have a chance to keep making an impact, keep



the "doughboy" tradition alive and just go out there and make plays and have fun.

Q. This is the first Big Ten defense to sport a shut-out in a bowl game since 1999. Other than Tory, I don't know if any of you guys were born then. I guess what do you think of the accomplishment of getting the shut-out? Was that something that maybe by halftime you were -- and the third quarter were you guys building towards, hey, we want to keep this going?

XAVIER NWANKPA: Yeah, for sure. Our plan is to not let anyone score any game, but through the third quarter we were really, like, focused on keeping that shut-out. Hopefully Coach Parker or someone will bring some doughnuts for the plane ride home tomorrow.

Thank you.

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