

Vrbo Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs Kentucky

Friday, December 31, 2021

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Coach Mark Stoops

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, good morning to everybody, appreciate everybody being here and just want to start off by thanking everybody involved with the Citrus Bowl. It's been fantastic, starting with Steve Hogan, done a great job obviously for many years with this, and our hosts at the hotel, we've had Chris, Pat and Susan do a great job of making everybody feel really at home and having a great experience.

We certainly feel it is a privilege to be here. Our guys are excited to play in another game. Everybody feels that way. To earn a Bowl bid like the Citrus Bowl, really proud of that and feel very, very fortunate to be here and to play an opponent like Kentucky, highly competitive team, very successful and been successful for quite some time. That's a big, big challenge for us certainly.

We got here last Sunday. Guys have had a great week overall I think. Certainly, Orlando lends itself to a lot of great activities, and the committee does a great job of making those available to our players. They have done a really nice job of enjoying what Orlando has to offer, what the Citrus Bowl offers and trying to get prepared for the football game as well.

That's our goal coming to any Bowl game is enjoying the venue we're at. Any time you're in a Bowl game like this, you're going to play an outstanding team like this.

Our captains this week and our permanent captains -- our team voted on this a couple weeks ago -- are Tyler Linderbaum on offense, we've got Jack Campbell on defense, Jack Koerner, Matt Hankins, and then Caleb Shudak is our special teams captain.

Matt Hankins had surgery a couple weeks ago, so he's obviously done. Terry Roberts will not make the game. He's had a nagging injury here for it feels like about four months -- it's been about two, I think -- but he's not going to be able to go. And, Xavier Williams won't be able to go

either. But otherwise, our entire team will be out there, and everybody is ready to go about that.

Just regarding Kentucky, we know we have our hands full. They are an outstanding football team. They have played well all season. Got a lot of momentum coming into this game. When you watch them, they are really impressive in every area, offensively, defensively, special teams, very well-coached. They play hard. They play tough, and they play in a tremendous conference, obviously. We know we've got our hands full on that challenge.

We have our last practice today, just like Kentucky. We will both hit the field today for one last workout and then kick into a game day mode, if you will. We are all eager for that.

Again, I think the thing about Bowls. They are just a great, great reward. Been around for a few of them now, and when Mark was a player, even in the '80s, they were really special. That has not changed at all, and just a great reward for a great season. Great opportunity for the players on both teams to be involved and great activities, things you normally wouldn't get exposed to.

We have had a great, great week, and it will be better if we play well tomorrow. That's our goal, and we know it's going to be a tough challenge.

MARK STOOPS: Piggyback a little bit on Coach Ferentz, thank you to Steve Hogan and everybody involved in the Florida [Vrbo] Citrus Bowl, first class, treat us with great respect. It's the second time we've been here in a few years, and our players really enjoy it.

So looking forward to getting to game day. Like Coach said, we will finish up our last practice here today and get ready to go. It's been a great week, but it's been a long week, and it's time to get going and get ready for this game.

We are looking forward to the opportunity to play Iowa. I have great respect for Coach Ferentz. I have known Coach Ferentz for a long time in the Hawkeye program, being that I have played there, so obviously I have followed them very closely and have great respect about the way they play,

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the way they are coached. They are extremely fundamental, they play extremely hard, and you always have an opportunity to win when you do that.

Proud of our football team and the way we have fought this year. Really, guys played very hard. They have been a joy to coach. It's been a very good year and looking forward to this last challenge here tomorrow.

Our team is in relatively good shape. We will see, going right down to the wire with a few guys as well as far as injury is concerned, but hopefully we'll be at full strength.

The guys have worked hard and enjoyed themselves and they like being here. When we were leading up to this process and we knew that the Citrus was a viable option, the players were very excited about coming back here. They enjoyed themselves the last time they were here. You know, you are going to play a great opponent coming from the Big Ten.

Once again, guys are excited. I feel we have a good balance of going through the week, enjoying the activities, enjoying Orlando, but being very attentive in the meetings and having good, quality practices. It's that time and we're looking forward to it.

Q. Brian Ferentz said that you guys have pretty much made up your mind at quarterback. Who will be the starting quarterback tomorrow?

KIRK FERENTZ: I guess you'll know at one o'clock --probably before that, actually. I really don't think it's that big a deal. I know it is to everybody, been asked about it, but we have faith in both guys. Both guys have done a great job.

Ultimately, it's about how our team plays, quite frankly. That's our goal -- to play good team offense and hopefully be able to move the ball and score some points.

Q. I was going to ask that question of you, but I'll change to a second one. Without having Tyler Goodson, how do you plan to divide the carries, and what are the advantages of the three backs, who probably will see whatever number you plan to distribute?

KIRK FERENTZ: When Tyler made his decision, wasn't counting on Ivory [Kelly-Martin] to be available. Our plan was to go with Gavin [Williams] and Leshon [Williams]. We have faith in both those guys. Leshon really hasn't played much, but he's practiced really well. He caught our attention last spring and really started to ascend.

Then getting Ivory back is just a bonus for us, and happy to say he's had two good weeks of practice right now. He looks like he's in shape and looks like he's going to be fine. And, that will help us on our special teams as well

The answer is we will probably play all three of them, rotate them in there. In certain situations, we may favor one over the other, but feel good about the group as a whole.

Q. Kind of building on that, in this room, say, about five years ago, we were having a conversation leading into the Citrus Bowl about Leonard Fournette missing games and stepping away; now it's become more commonplace. As far as it pertains to you guys and from your point of view, if you could talk quickly about Tyler's situation, stepping away from the game, and also your general opinion about player mobility in the college landscape right now?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's interesting, as you ask that question, flashback, I don't like to share private conversations a lot, but I got a text from Bob Stoops, who came out of retirement, and he texted me after three weeks on the job and said, I don't know how you guys do it anymore. That's after a five year [absence] -- so it lines up with what you're pointing out.

That struck me. I realize things are changing, but I didn't realize it was that dramatic in five years' time. Really, it's just part of the landscape that we're living in right now. I think we are seeing a lot of things none of us thought were maybe going to happen or could happen five years ago are happening now.

It's just the world we live in. The whole world is changing, certainly, how it affects college football players change. First of all, respect Tyler's [Goodson] decision. I respect Tyler a great deal. I look at it a lot, to me, it's like anybody. Your job is to do your job and do it as well as you can day-in and day-out. If you do that, when you walk away, you should be -- you know, feel good about things.

Tyler has certainly done that. I appreciate the fact that he was prompt with his decision, allowed us to prepare, knowing that we wouldn't have him, and a lot of appreciation for that. I have heard of cases that weren't like that, and that would be a different situation to deal with.

A sign of the times. Dealing with things we weren't dealing with four or five years ago and just roll with the flow.

Q. Could you update the situation with Josh Paschal, and do you think he'll be able to play in this one tomorrow?

MARK STOOPS: Glad you Kentucky media woke up, I was enjoying my coffee actually (laughter).

Josh is highly questionable. He really wants to play. I don't feel like I could play him with a clear conscience. He's given us everything. Just like Coach said, you talk about these guys laying it on the line for you every day for years, and Josh, you folks that cover Kentucky, you've heard me talk about it many times, but Josh is a guy that just absolutely empties his tank each and every practice, each and every game.

He reagravated an injury and made it worse in the Louisville game and had other health issues that he couldn't travel with us, and he just got down here a couple days ago. And to be honest with you, I think it's highly questionable for him to play.

Q. Any favorite memory of Hayden Fry? And then, Kirk, any favorite memory of Mark?

MARK STOOPS: Hayden Fry, well, we could tell you a few stories, probably, and get a kick out of him, because he was such a beloved figure in Iowa for so long. Meant so much to my family.

I think a memory that sticks out to me is the fact that Coach Fry, along with a few of his assistants, traveled to my father's funeral during the week when we were preparing to play Michigan. At that point in time, just about every year, probably a lot like now, but at that point seemed like, the winner of the Iowa-Michigan game had the upper hand to play in the Rose Bowl. Big football game.

He flew in, just to pay respects to my mother and our family; it says an awful lot about him. You know, he had a great impact on myself, my brothers, so many other players; you see the characteristics that Hayden Fry started so many years ago still running with Coach Ferentz. And the way they run their organization, they are first class in everything they do.

So, you know, it's a special place.

KIRK FERENTZ: Quick one I've shared –

MARK STOOPS: Hey, let's (laughter) –

KIRK FERENTZ: Three Stoops' played for us, and Mark was the last one in line. When he was sitting in Bill Brazier's office, Bill was Hayden's longtime coordinator, defensive coordinator, outstanding coach, outstanding man. Later in the meeting that day, he says, I keep telling myself that's a Stoops, I couldn't believe we were recruiting this guy.

Mark looked like he was 14 coming out of high school.

MARK STOOPS: Wish I did now (laughter).

KIRK FERENTZ: Saw the whole family in Las Vegas when Bob was inducted in the Hall of Fame two weeks ago, three weeks ago, whenever it was. I was teasing the oldest brother, Ron, who is the youngest looking, because he didn't get into college coaching. (Laughter.) He's the smartest one out of all of us.

MARK STOOPS: That's right.

Q. I know you probably don't pay much attention to this, but the Big Ten is 5-0 this Bowl season. Do you think that's an accurate reflection of the overall strength of the conference?

KIRK FERENTZ: Honest answer is the only game I'm worried about is ours, quite frankly. Not to be self-centered, but that is really my responsibility and our responsibility.

We play in a great conference, and we knew that, especially knew it this year. Week-in and week-out, there were no easy games. I think that is probably one thing I've noticed coming back after a nine-year layoff from the Big Ten, just the competitiveness, week-in and week-out.

We have expanded. It's a tough conference, but when you look around college football, there are a lot of conferences. These guys play in a really tough conference also. I think that is one of the attractions of college football. Not many lay-ups out there, that's for sure, at least uncontested ones.

Q. I think this is true for both of you, but I'll start with Kirk. I know Bowl games are very important to you, but Iowa has never won four straight Bowl games. You have an opportunity to do that.

KIRK FERENTZ: Didn't know that. Thank you. Thanks for sharing that one. (Laughter.) I know we have won three straight. I know that.

Q. You have an opportunity to do that this year. What would that mean? And that's accurate for Kentucky, going for your fourth straight.

MARK STOOPS: That's correct.

Q. If you could speak to that as well.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think both of us just want to win. That's what you play for and that's ultimately what you compete for. It is not everything, but it makes a big difference. My

wife observed that 35, 38 years ago, it really gets down to that.

Our goal is to play as hard as we can, play as well as we can, and then you let the chips fall where they may.

I'll throw a stat back at you. I think this is correct. We have been dogs in all but two, is that correct, in whatever it's been, 19 Bowls, 18 Bowls. Seems to be the world we live in.

MARK STOOPS: Don't take my role. That's usually us. We like to feel the same thing.

Same thing Coach said. We're really worried about this year. Proud of this team and the way we fought this season, and I think it's important to all teams. I mean, you go to these Bowls, you want to enjoy them, you find that balance. But ultimately, as I tell our players, the greatest memory they will have is postgame if you win. You know, collecting that trophy is important, so that's what we're playing for.

Q. Both programs have outstanding offensive lines, mainstay of the programs. In your opinion, what's the difference between a good offensive line and a really great offensive line?

MARK STOOPS: You're the expert on O-line play. (Laughter.)

But I will say, for us, I've always felt that way, really, going back to my college days, one thing about the offensive line is they kind of set the tone for your team.

First of all, there's a large group of them. There's 15, 16, 17, 18 large men walking around all the time, and just with their attitude, their persona, the way they carry themselves, the attitude, the toughness that they carry, kind of sets the tone for your team. It's extremely important.

Both leagues are line of scrimmage leagues. You need to be good on both sides of the line of scrimmage, and kind of starts there. So we have been fortunate.

And I can remember Coach, all the way back to him being a position coach at the time I was there. He set the tone at the University of Iowa a long, long time ago. I will not date him on that, but it was a long time ago, and he did a great job with offensive line play.

We are proud to carry that tradition at Kentucky. We always want to be better. But you've got to be big, you've got to be physical. And that's certainly Iowa, and that's certainly something at Kentucky we're trying to be.

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll echo that, it gives you a chance to win. That and playing good defense and good special teams gives you a chance to win any game. Compliment Kentucky's line. There is a difference right now. We are not as veteran as we would like to be. We have as good a center as there is in the country, although they have an outstanding center as well.

We had a tough year outside of that just in terms of -- we had a couple veteran players that were injured. We played a lot of young guys this year. We are 13 games into it now. We should be better and should be more developed than we were back in September. I have seen progress each and every day with our group. Hopefully, it will show tomorrow. Going to need to if we are going to have a chance in this game.

Q. Talk about instilling leadership in the seniors and the leadership you've seen them exhibit with their teams.

MARK STOOPS: It's extremely important. Leadership, neither team would be here without the leadership provided by our seniors and what goes on in our program.

You know, I think that is going to carry through tomorrow. Again, finding that balance of coming here, enjoying yourself, but when you step on the practice field, when you step into meetings, being locked in to win the football game. I think it's extremely important, once again, to the folks here that put on a first-class Bowl game. They expect a good game, and we certainly feel that obligation and look forward to the challenge.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think leadership, if you're going to have a good football team, and nobody makes it to this Bowl game without having a good team, this is such a prestigious Bowl game. You have to have leadership, and the best leadership comes from within. We do so much as coaches, set the tone, all that type of thing. The players are the ones that play the game and dictate the tempo of things in our building, on the field, but most importantly away from the building.

We have a fairly young team. That really jumped out at me last spring. Especially look at the pandemic, we had 70 guys that had never been through a spring practice that were out there on the field, 70 out of 100. But our leaders, our upperclassmen have been really good, and that's given us a chance to have a successful year.

And football, especially, football is so unique as a sport. One guy is not going to lead you to a championship, it's impossible at any level -- pro, college, high school --

whereas in other sports you can see that happen.

We only get 12, 13, 14 opportunities a year. We don't play 20 games or 30 games, 40 games. It's more about the preparation. It's more about the day-to-day. I think that's the concept of teamwork and leadership and chemistry amongst each other, that's what determines the success of a team. Like I said, neither team would be here right now if they didn't have those characteristics ingrained in the program.

It's a real compliment to the players involved on both sides.

Q. How do you talk to your team about getting the bad taste out of their mouth from the Big Ten Championship and focusing on the great things you've done this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: That was our single message, and I repeated the same message twice, two separate meetings. Immediately following, our guys took a little break. We played on a Saturday, we met I think Tuesday morning and circled back that weekend.

First thing, It is like anything, it's like in-season as well, you put it behind you. You learn from it. Anything you do, you learn from it, you examine it, learn from it and move on.

Our focus has been, hey, we have had a great year. We won 10 games. I think it's the tenth time in Iowa Football history the team has won 10 games, and have an opportunity to win 11. Let's focus on that.

We have a good team. Great guys. Let's move forward and put it behind us. It's like a corner that gets beat or an offensive tackle and everybody knows who is that guy that got beat for the sack or the touchdown. Got to keep playing.

That's what we are going to do, and our focus is straight ahead. Our look is always forward, Dwight Eisenhower, right? That's where it is.

Q. For both of you. Having both won three straight Bowls, what's the difference in the months that follow in a program after you've won one, as opposed to not winning or not evening playing in one?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll say the next three days are pretty damn good (Laughter), because you don't have to work. All right, you are done, and you can actually finally for one time in the season really enjoy things. You know, because what we do. We are always kind of -- as pertains to the last question -- we are looking forward, what's the next challenge, what's the next thing to get ready, etc.

This is the one time of year, when we get on the plane tomorrow, I'll go home, no agenda, no itinerary. It's going to be nice to look back a little bit. It's hell of a lot better after winning, I can tell you that. Learn that when you're in third grade probably.

MARK STOOPS: So normally we have the 24-hour rule, right, really about 12, by the time we get home we have to bury that game and get ready for the game next Sunday. Just like Coach said, maybe we can enjoy this one for two or three days.

I think that's the same thing. Just momentum maybe helping you a little bit, enjoying a little bit of time as we try to decompress and rest up a little bit and give your staff a little bit of time and your team a little bit of time, give you a little momentum heading into the winter and into the spring. Other than that, it's just like any other game. The highs are high and the lows are low. So always trying to end on a high note.

Q. Getting off to a good start tomorrow and putting the pressure on the offense what would that mean for your ballclub?

MARK STOOPS: I think it's important, but I think with both teams you wouldn't be here if you didn't have the resiliency to continue to fight and to finish. It's about finishing the game, and starting is important, but finishing it is probably more important.

KIRK FERENTZ: Same thing. Be great to get off to a good start but chances are it's going to be a 60-minute game, that would be my guess. We don't play many that are that way.

MARK STOOPS: Ditto.

Q. You've talked about the transfer portal and the realities of transfer turnover. How important was for you to let those guys that are already in the portal play and make the trip? Seems like several of those guys are here with you.

MARK STOOPS: I thought it was important. They have worked extremely hard and been valuable members of our football team since they have been at this campus. If they wouldn't have been, they wouldn't be at this Bowl game. As long as they are extremely positive, working extremely hard, they deserve the opportunity to come here and enjoy some of this experience.

Sometimes now in this new world we are in, it's mutual. You have hard conversations with guys. You give them the

reality of what the situation is, and they make choices. I'm glad they are here. All the guys have worked extremely hard and we want to help them land on their feet with a new opportunity.

Q. You often talk about these moments where it's more than a game, and I think we got that earlier this month with Iowa donating tornado relief funds. When you heard that was going to happen, what went through your mind and what does that say about Iowa Football and the university itself?

MARK STOOPS: First of all, it really didn't surprise me. Really, to take time during that moment, said a lot about Coach Ferentz, his wife, Mary, the entire program, the entire state. Certainly, with Coach and I, when that tornado hit, we were probably at the peak of being busy. The season is difficult, but the way this calendar falls right now, we are extremely busy during that time of year.

That tornado was so close to myself, and you have a tendency to get so wrapped up in what you're doing that you need to step out of that box and take a look at what's going on. That was certainly for myself, and it was so close to me, but to have Coach reach out and have people do that throughout the state, says a lot about Iowa, says a lot about Coach, says a lot about Iowa Football and says a lot about the state, and it was greatly appreciated.

Q. I know you have not faced Kentucky but you have seen guys like Will and Wan'Dale in a Big Ten capacity.

KIRK FERENTZ: Thanks for reminding me. They have gotten better, too, by the way.

Q. What advantages are there to having faced them?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know if it's an advantage. We know they are good players. I'm serious. I think they are playing a really high level right now. They played well at their previous schools but they are playing at a high level. There are a lot of challenges for us tomorrow but those are two of the guys tomorrow, throwing the running backs, throwing the offensive line, go right down the list, they have a lot of really good players.

But how they are utilizing their talents and abilities, they are very impressive and they are very explosive.

Q. Have you ever had a quarterback eat a banana whole, and what did you think when you saw that from Will Levis?

MARK STOOPS: I've really just dismissed that question to be honest with you. I think Coach and I are a lot alike when

it comes to that stuff. So be it, if he wants to eat a banana with a peel on it, go for it. As long as he continues to practice and play the way he does. Whatever fuels him, I'm good with, but he's a character.

But I tell you, he's wired the right way. One thing about Will is he may have a little fun with social media and doing things of that nature, but he is all business. The minute he walks in our building, he is wired correctly. Probably puts too much pressure on himself. He really is a super competitive guy, works extremely hard in the meeting room, studies, works, plays that way, lays it on the line for his teammates; if he has to lower his shoulder and try to get tough yards, he'll do it. He's really playing at a high level and we're appreciative of that.

Q. Do you see many similarities with the way Iowa plays defense now under Phil Parker?

MARK STOOPS: I do. With Phil and his staff and Coach's staff and what they do and the way they play, I'll be honest with you, tell you a story. When we first started. We were obviously finishing recruiting and knew we were playing the Hawks and all that. Then, we started watching film and immediately put a smile on my face. Well, it was a frown and a smile. Because the frown was, oh, damn, they are pretty darn good.

But the smile was, I love the fundamentals of the game, and Phil and his defense and the entire program you see that the minute you put on the film.

So for me to go back, and haven't competed against the Hawks in a long time, but seeing the black and gold, and seeing the way they play fundamentally, you have an appreciation as a coach. The greatest compliment you can give any coach is to put on that screen and see the way they play. They play extremely hard and extremely fundamental and their scheme is fantastic. When you put all that together, it's a pretty darned good product.

Q. You touched on him as a player, but can you describe him as a player?

MARK STOOPS: Not very good (Laughter).

KIRK FERENTZ: I wasn't there for his whole career, but no, he was an excellent football player. I'll go back to Bob. Bob was the first Stoops I was introduced to, and Mark just mentioned Phil Parker. I always looked across the field at Phil Parker at Michigan State and thought he could be a Stoops.

My point is, all four guys, the guys I know, the three Stoops and Phil included were smart and tough players. Maybe,

[they] weren't as gifted as some other guys and didn't go on to have NFL careers, but they played the game the way it's supposed to be played. They really know what they are doing. They are physically and mentally tough.

Mark was the same way. Great career, great leader and just an outstanding individual. University of Iowa is just so fortunate to have Mark and his brothers have been former players. Just great, great people. I'm not surprised at all at the success that everybody in that group has had in the profession coaching. It's great for coaching that they are involved, not only as coaches but the kind of people that they are, and that's probably more important in life.

Q. I think this is your sixth straight Bowl game at Kentucky. Seems like in Bowl season, every once in a while, a team shows up kind of flat and the game is reflected that way. I'm not going to ask you to comment on anybody else's team but seems like win or lose your teams have played hard and about as well as they can. Why do you think that is?

MARK STOOPS: I think you would say that about both teams, because of the pride and the leadership in the organization. I think that's a big piece of it. Just like Coach mentioned earlier, really, the same at Kentucky. You want to be player-led. It starts with them. It's the way they come prepared. You know what their mindset is.

We work on that from day one, you know, in the summer, all the way through, and I think there is a fine balance in Bowl games. You want them to enjoy it, but again, there has to be a discipline and you have to be serious when you get into the meeting room and on the practice field and our players have responded. Hopefully, we will do that again.

Q. For both of you what is a trait about the other or the other's team that you maybe envy or wish you could replicate?

MARK STOOPS: For me, it is as I mentioned earlier. It is the respect I have for the way Iowa plays. I want opposing coaches to put on the film and feel the same way about our team and that is a team that is fundamentally sound that plays the game with great technique. There are a lot of cute stuff you can do, but it's about being physical and being fundamental and playing extremely hard. Yes, we have to put them in a position strategically to be successful.

The game of football is not going to change. It is about blocking. It is about being physical, it is about getting off blocks, containing the football, playing with leverage, all the basics and that's what you see when you see Iowa. Hopefully, that is what you see when you put on the film on

Sunday after we play this game.

KIRK FERENTZ: I had echo the same things. Almost like looking in the mirror, we don't run the exact same schemes but there are a lot of similar traits in the programs. The guys compete. They play hard, compete and they make you earn things. They make the opponent earn what they get and I think that's a goal any coach has any time you play.

I would also echo. You don't get to a game like this by luck or by chance. It is a long season of hard work and guys doing things well. The other thing I think maybe mirrors is the success long term of the programs. I am not an expert of college football. Kind of pay attention to some stuff. I don't know how many coaches have been in one program for nine years. It's probably a small number.

It probably is a small number. I am not an expert on Kentucky Football history, but I would bank this has been a pretty good run. I don't think that happens by accident, and I think both of us would agree a lot of that goes back to our roots in the '80s at Iowa. Just gave us a good foundation to build off of and at least have a clue to know what it takes to be successful on a continual basis.

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