

Big Ten Conference Football Media Days

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Kirk Ferentz

Iowa

KIRK FERENTZ: Good morning. Just good to be with all of you, as well. Look forward to the start of the 2019 season. I just want to start off by taking a moment to recognize just a tremendous career that Jim Delany has enjoyed. I first came to these meetings 20-plus years ago, and was really quick to see the kind of leadership and the vision that Jim possessed back then, and his impact on our conference, let alone college football and college athletics has just been, I think, tremendously positive and tremendously dynamic and very, very important. Just want to congratulate Jim on the fine work that he's done for the conference and all the leadership that he's provided. Wish him obviously all the best moving forward.

Someone earlier this week told me the first time I came to these meetings Sammy Sosa was playing right field for the Cubs and there were 11 teams back then, so it just kind of highlights the kind of change I think that we've all seen in the world over the last couple decades, and that really hasn't changed.

I jumped on a bike earlier this week in our facility. We got a new bike, exercise bike, and it took me about 15 minutes to figure out all the bells and whistles that are on it. The bottom line is all kinds of getting on it, I'm sure I don't understand 10 percent of it but the bottom line is you've still got to pedal the bike. That's kind of reflective of college football, also, the way things have changed over the last couple decades, whether it's our training, the way we practice, certainly recruiting has changed a huge amount. You think about the media coverage now and interest as compared to 20 years ago, not only in football but the recruiting, so a lot of things in our lives have changed a great deal.

And beyond that, I think about the Big Ten Network 10 years ago, a lot of people were very skeptical about that and look what that's grown into. The world has certainly changed but I think the goals for most of us pretty much stays the same. That gets down to trying to field a championship level football team year in and year out, trying to get athletes to do a good job of going to class, doing quality work and earning their degrees, and then probably most importantly just be good contributing positive citizens in their community.

Those things really haven't changed. So just like riding



a bike, you've got to pedal it, you've got to put energy into it. The basics, being the fundamentals that it takes to be successful in anything I don't think have changed in any amount of time.

That part has remained consistent, and as it pertains to our athletes when they learn those fundamentals and they learn how to do things on a consistent basis with some discipline, those things will serve them really well for their life after football, which every one our players faces that reality at some point.

So the bottom line is what we're doing really hasn't changed an awful lot. The world around us has changed, but the fundamentals I think really remain the same.

We had a really good football team, it was a fun team to be with last year, a fun team to be with on a daily basis and work with, but at the end of every season you lose good players, that's for sure, and if you have a good football team you're going to lose good players. So we face that like every team in the country. Start of January we had a new year, new calendar year and certainly a new football team, and that team has continually changed and we had our freshmen a couple months ago, they came in June.

So it's an ongoing process but just really happy with this team so far. They've worked hard. We've got a bunch of quality players on our team. The three players that are here for this day event are representative, I think, of the kind of guys that we have on our football team, and that certainly gets us excited.

But all that being said, we also realize we've got a lot of work in front of us. I think the team has improved with every phase, most important thing for us right now is to finish up the summer phase of our program, take a good break, and then we'll hit the field here when the next month comes around and we're all certainly looking forward to that.

That being said, I'll throw it out for any questions.

Q. Coach, you lost some really good pieces but you bring some good guys back. What excites you the most about this season and what's all got to come together to make it work for you guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think so far just the attitude that we've seen as coaches, watching the guys work, it's been very positive. I think the attitude has been consistent since January when things got started, and more importantly maybe the leadership base has grown. So I think we see a lot of guys taking ownership right now. I think they're excited about trying to become a good football team, and we have -- I mentioned we lost a lot of good players but I think we have some really good players coming back, and they'll kind of be the guys that will have to lead the way a little bit for us and hopefully when September rolls around, late August, we'll be able to play competitive football.

Q. You mentioned it comes down to fielding a championship-level football team. How far away do you think you are from winning that Big Ten Championship?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we'll find out. We have a chance, have an opportunity, and that's the first thing you have to do is put yourself in position to be competitive. Then once you get to that spot, then it's a matter of just handling all the little things well. Last year I thought we played good football. All of our four losses -- I can do math, they didn't come down to one possession, but if you were at the games, they were basically one-possession ballgames, and that's really the difference between being at the top, being near the top or being in the middle or being at the bottom, how you handle those little things.

For us historically we have to be able to win close games, and then I think bigger and more importantly, the bigger picture, we have to really be improvement driven. We'd better be getting better, and that's true any day of the week, that's true any month of the year. If we're not moving forward, we're going to have a hard time being successful. If our players understand that and we do a good job as coaches, we understand that, then at least we give ourselves a chance to maybe be competitive when it all counts.

Q. You had to replace two first-round draft picks at tight end. They're tough to replace, obviously. Who's going to step up for you at that position, and how far of a drop off do you think there will be between those two?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, we've had some really good players in our program. You go back to -- name anybody, Banks, take off the '02 team, Banks and Clark, two pretty good players. And I think that's probably a good place to start because Brad Banks, August 2002, or July, whenever it was we had these meetings then, nobody even knew who the guy was. He hadn't started a game in major college football; ends up being the runner-up to the Heisman, AP Player of the Year, Big Ten Player of the Year.

You just never know how guys are going to emerge, how they're going to develop and how they're going to play and compete on the field, and they get an opportunity. On that team, Bob Sanders, Dallas Clark, two other guys, Robert Gallery, those guys graduated, then next year Kaeding. To answer the question, you don't replace guys like that. They're legendary players, if you will, for a reason. They just end up climbing the ladder and what have you, and I think any time you talk about losing a first-round player, that's a pretty special accomplishment.

We're going to go with the guys that we have on the roster, and I think if you look at guys like Nate Wieting, who's had some injury issues. I think he's a really good football player, and I think he's just waiting for his opportunity. He's practiced well, trained well. I'm very confident he'll play very well for us. Shaun Beyer is a guy who hasn't put it all together yet, but he's got the potential to do that, and this will be a great time for him to take a big step forward. Drew Cook was out this past spring but we think Drew can help us at that position, as well.

All that being said, even if those guys play well, we won't be as deep as we were a year ago, so it'll change things a little bit in terms of our formula of guys on the field. But that's just football. You kind of adjust every year to where your strengths are and try to feature the guys that you know can do a good job for you.

Q. Talk about Nate Stanley and the progression he's made at quarterback over the last few years.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, you asked that question I think about the first time we brought Nate in. I think it was like a 3rd and 1, 3rd and 2, something like that, I don't know, maybe 3rd and 4. I don't know, it was a third-down situation against North Dakota State his true freshman year. Something happened to CJ. CJ came out and Nate fired a strike his first play. So he was a young kid at that time. He was ready to go, and we weren't afraid to let him go.

I think he's just done a really good job for us. He's a tremendous young man first and foremost, very serious, very conscientious, extremely hard-working and very team oriented. He's done a good job for two seasons for us. You hope all of your players are improving, and I think it's really critical on any football team if your best guys aren't improving or if they're not playing their best, you're not going to have a good football team, and Nate embraces that. He can't wait to play this year, I'm sure. And I think one nice thing about experience, you can't hand it to anybody. He's been out on the field in tough circumstances, so I think all those things will benefit him, and I'm sure he'll put those to good use this fall.

Q. With the good games you've had with Nebraska in the past and the perception that their program is on the rise, do you notice from your fan base or players that there's a little bit more fieriness towards them in the past couple years?

KIRK FERENTZ: My history with them goes back to 1981, my first game as an assistant at Iowa was against them, and they had beaten us by a lot, and the year before we upset them. In '81, they paid us back the next year pretty handily over in Lincoln. You know, back then it really wasn't a series. We played them tough and beat them one time back in the '80s. Coincidentally when I get back to Iowa in '99 my first game as a head coach was against Nebraska, and it was competitive for about 10 minutes.

You know, and we had a two-game series there and we didn't come close in either one. At least it's at a point now where it's a series, and I think both teams enjoy the match-up. It's a trophy game, I think one of the neater trophies in college football, sponsored by Hy-Vee. It's just the Heroes Trophy, which recognizes people in both states that have just done some really amazing things. So I think that's just a really nice caveat to the whole thing.

But it's been a good, good series, and they've done a tremendous job in a short amount of time, and they're going to be a really tough team. I know that.

Q. Coach, you've seen a lot of changes during your 21 years at Iowa. If I gave you a magic wand, what change would you make today?

KIRK FERENTZ: (Laughs). That's a good question. My first thought would be recruiting. I have no positive suggestion to make. I made a lot of little tweaks I think that we needed to make and could make real quickly, but it wouldn't address I think the No. 1 problem. Just the speed of recruiting right now to me is really concerning. In a logical world you would wait for everybody to finish their careers, evaluate them, and then go about the recruiting process. Kind of like the NFL does it.

You know, they still make a lot of mistakes. I heard Bill Polian on the radio this past year talking about their study was somewhere roughly around 50 percent of the first-rounders hit it. Think about the time and money they invest to evaluate those players, college players, and just how thorough and in-depth that is, and we're recruiting 10th graders. We'll have guys going into their junior year on our campus. Here at the end of the month, we'll be hosting them for a junior day.

If you think about it from a logical standpoint, you really can't make it make sense. But that's the world we're

living in, so you just adjust and adapt to it. But that being said, I think there are some things that we can do to make it a little bit more logical and a little bit more sane, and I think we've taken some of those steps, we just have a lot of territory to cover still.

It's going to be a challenge moving forward for sure.

Q. One of the big changes is now the transfer portal. I know you've added some big wide receivers in the off-season that way. What's your approach to adding guys through the transfer portal?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, so I'm only chuckling because that ties in with that last question. I guess I forgot that part. Just some clarity on that whole thing would really help, too. I understand how the portal works. That's pretty clear, pretty decisive. What is confusing is who gets a pass to the field and who doesn't, and that didn't just start this past 12 months, either.

It's been a little confusing to figure out who can get a waiver and who can't, what are the actual criteria. I'd like to see that get cleaned up a little bit.

We haven't been really active in it a whole lot. You mentioned we had a couple guys that have transferred that are non-scholarship players, and I don't think they were scholarship players at their given institutions, and I expect them not to be ready this year. I imagine they'll have to redshirt, that's my understanding at least. We're not counting on that to build our team or really even supplement our team. And conversely, we've had players -- I think we've had four quarterbacks leave our program as grad transfers and go on to other schools and done very, very well, not only for themselves but they've led their teams in a really stellar way, and I understand that a little bit better because there's only one seat when it comes to a quarterback typically. So I get that part a little bit and I think that was a good thing for the four individuals.

And ultimately it's kind of like everything we do in college football, it should be about what's best for the players, and I think in all four of those cases it worked out, so I'm perfectly happy and comfortable with that.

But going back to the original question, I just think we could use a little bit more clarity in terms of what happens once a player decides to leave a school, what are the actual ABC's of the whole thing.