

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Welcome to everybody to Hawkeye Media Day. Appreciate all of you being here. It was brought to my attention on September 1st it's going to mark the 130th anniversary of Iowa football, so that's obviously pretty special. I think all of us feel very, very fortunate to have such a tremendous tradition and heritage in our program.

It's certainly an exciting time for everybody, our players, coaches. I'm sure we'll all be eager, a little bit anxious when game week comes around, and hopefully our fans will be excited, too. That's usually the case. It is approaching fast. Certainly we've got a lot of work to do between now and then.

As many of you may know, this is my 20th year, and for the record that's the last time I'll mention that this year. But one thing I've learned is that for a team to be competitive and to be successful, it all begins with just setting high expectations, clear expectations, and then trying to create an environment where we have great accountability and great teamwork.

That being said, I think most of you know coming into the season right now, we have 115 players allowed to be in camp. Four of those players will not be with us in the first game for violating team policy over the course of the last several months, and we've dealt with that. We'll continue to deal with that through the suspension, and then moving forward, very, very eager to get the guys back in good standing and get them moving forward and have them be contributing members of our football team. That's what we fully expect from all four of them.

As I stated back in Chicago, we really have been pleased with our team throughout the summer, in terms of the strength and conditioning program. We had two days remaining when we came back, I guess we got back Tuesday night and finished up Wednesday, and the guys did a good job there. And then since that time, they were on a week's break, which was needed and necessary, give them a change to recharge a little bit and regroup, and then we got on the field last Friday night for the first time.

Like always, that's the best part about coaching, having a chance to be back on the field. Preseason preparation to me is one of the most enjoyable times because, again, it's pure teaching. We're in meetings, we're on the field with them. They're eating or else they're resting. That's pretty much what they're doing.

It's good to get back working. I've seen a lot of positives thus far. Certainly seen a lot of areas that still are going to need a lot of work and attention, and that's really what the preseason is all about. And as I stated earlier, really the one thing that's been consistent, the attitude and the effort of the team has been consistent going back to January, so that's

certainly where everything starts. Certainly we've got a lot of work to do.

Obviously we've lost a good group of seniors, guys that played well on the field, and a couple of them are continuing to play well by all accounts, now that they're getting a chance in the NFL. But beyond that, they really gave us good leadership.

It all starts there trying to replace those guys, see who can follow in their footsteps and assume some of those leadership roles and give us production on the field. We've got a group of 13 seniors that I think are doing a really nice job, and other guys, younger guys, that have played significant snaps for us. So certainly we're counting on them.

The next group down would be the guys that we're obviously interested to see how they transition and progress, and that's part of college football. There's a lot of opportunity right now out there on the roster, and it's interesting to see who's in competition for those positions and how they can handle the situations that we put them in.

And then beyond that, we've got a group of newcomers, be it first-year players that are just out of high school or guys like Kyle Groeneweg, who was ineligible last year because of a transfer, to see him be able to mixing out there with our first and second offense, a guy like Mekhi Sargent, the same way, who's a little bit older, newcomer still, but guys that I think have a chance to really help our football team.

And then the other part of the equation besides what's going on on the field is just the leadership base and how that progresses and moves along, and again, I mentioned the 13 seniors. I think all those guys have done a nice job of modeling the right behaviors. We've got a leadership group of 12 guys, six of whom are seniors, that are doing the same thing. It's really important that those guys continue on and show the other guys how to practice, how to meet, how to do things away from the building, how to study, how to be involved with community service, all those kinds of things, and thus far, again, can only compliment the job that group has done.

Last couple points real quickly and I'll open it up for questions. Certainly things that haven't changed in college football, a lot of things have changed, recruiting, what have you, but to be a good college football player, to become a senior, to earn a degree at a Big Ten University, to be a model citizen in the community, all those things are really hard. It's very, very challenging, and I say it every year at senior day and every year as the season ends, just have nothing but admiration for the guys that stay the course and go through the program start to finish.

The bottom line is it just requires great effort and focus first and foremost, and it takes a lot of dedication and discipline, as well, and that's the key to really being successful in anything you do in life. Just really proud of the guys that we have and anxious to see the seniors especially have a great year, a great opportunity.

I'll just close, again, by thanking all of you for the job that you do year-round. I think our – what we do is competitive and challenging at times, and I know you guys live in a world that's changing probably more rapidly than ours, and it is challenging, but I am just hopeful that we can work well all season long and continue to give our fans a good vantage point in terms of how the teams operate and how they're feeling and how they're doing. Just appreciate the efforts that you put in, and I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. You've got some linebackers you have to replace; how is that going? How is the competition going in preseason with your linebacking corps?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, questions about the linebackers, that's an obvious area of need, much like after the '13 season where we had three seniors graduate. Same thing here, three guys plus Kevin Ward, who was a really valuable member of that group.

We're about where we were at the end of spring, Amani Jones and Nick Niemann really surfaced as being two guys that really looked like they were ahead of the pack, and I think after that it's a wide-open competition. Safe to say Barrington Wade, we'll keep him outside, but that doesn't mean Nick Niemann couldn't move inside, and then there are a couple other guys that most likely won't be outside, but would play in one of those interior positions. So if you look at a guy like Jack Hockaday, you look at a guy like Djimon Colbert, certainly Kristian Welch, right down the list, those guys, they're still going to compete and hopefully – they're all doing a good job. Hopefully over time we'll have a better picture what it looks like.

Q. When you look at Northern Illinois and not having your starting two tackles, who right now would be in line to take those opening snaps, and what kind of challenge does that present your offense to not have those guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: Full disclosure, this is the 20th year, I couldn't tell you a thing about our first team, first opponent, and I don't say that with any lack of respect to our opponents. I've never worried too much about that. Always kind of looked at it like we'll have plenty of time to get ready for the guys when we have to, when school starts here. It's been that way for 20 years. I'm not overlooking anybody.

Our focus has been more on our guys, and our focus right now is on who we can get ready to go in and play well. Typically in any season, you're hopeful that you have at least eight guys on the offensive line that can go out there and play well for you, play winning football. This obviously adds to the degree of difficulty for us because two of those guys are not going to be playing in that opening game. It creates opportunity for the other guys, and it's our job to get those guys ready.

We've got a lot of respect – I understand they've got a very disruptive group of guys up front and one player who in particular is very, very good. That's not a surprise. The last time we played them, they were very talented and well-coached up front. That's certainly what I'm expecting when we play those guys. In all areas, they're a well-coached football team.

Q. Who would probably take those snaps - Mark Kallenberger, Levi Paulsen, anybody else?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, anybody that's eligible. Dalton Ferguson would be the other guy in that mix. Those guys would be the three most logical guys to fill in there, and hopefully those guys will continue to improve. So far they're practicing well, and we'll just keep pushing it forward.

Q. What's Alaric Jackson's situation? Is it a two strikes out of three situation? Is he walking a thin line?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's like any player on our football team. Everybody has got a resume that they're building, and they're either adding to it or taking away from it. You're building equity, like a bank account, or you're creating debt. But it's not static; it's an ongoing process. I think Alaric is a tremendous young man, and I'm very hopeful that he's going to have a great career here. I'm optimistic that he will. I feel – I'm just telling you honestly how I feel today, whatever the date is today, August 10th, I believe. I think he's going to have a great career here, and he's a tremendous young guy. With all four of the guys, I really look forward to getting them back active with our football team, and I'm very optimistic in all four cases that this is going to be a blip on the radar for them.

Q. How concerned are you right now with secondary depth?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm always concerned, yeah. And more so outside than inside, quite frankly. You know, we're trying to figure out who's 1 and 2, and I think that's become pretty clear with OJ (Michael Ojemudia) and (Matt) Hankins. I think they look like the two most solid candidates there. And then really we're in the same position we were at coming out of spring ball. I think it's wide open right now, and as you might imagine, that's a position where newcomers I think would have a realistic opportunity to play, and we've seen that the last couple years, Hankins jumping in, (Manny) Rugamba the year before at the end of the season, so I could see that happening in all reality.

Q. You mentioned Mekhi Sargent in your opening remarks. Has he progressed to the point where you could see sort of a three-man rotation back there?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I think I speak as a staff, I think we're all hopeful that we can get to that point. That was one of the primary reasons we made that move. As I've said before, Mekhi got on my radar back in December when Kelvin Bell had been up and saw him play in the bowl game up in the UNI Dome. He came back and made a comment to me that he just thought the guy was a quality player. We didn't know a lot about him at that time, so after that we started doing research, not knowing what Toks' (Akinribade) situation was going to be, and then unfortunately Toks was not able to play anymore, so that opened the door for us, and it was good to get another guy – Toks would have been a third-year player, to get a guy that's going to be a little bit older. We have two freshmen that we really like, but we wanted to have at least three guys on campus.

And then the big question was how is Mekhi going to do with us. He was great in the summer program, great attitude, is a really impressive young guy, seems very humble and very appreciative, and now we've got seven practices under our belt. And I'm not going to give a

lot of scouting reports, but Mekhi looks like he's really starting to warm up, and he had a really good day today, too. So that's encouraging. I could see him realistically helping us this year, absolutely, and it would be nice – we have three backs that we feel good about, three backs that have no experience virtually. It's kind of an interesting group that way.

Q. What can you say about Jake Gervase's play during the off-season, and what kind of competition is at that position?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, the reality is he was the guy last year. Jake got thrown in there – I wouldn't want to say when he wasn't ready but that's part of football. Injuries change things real dramatically and real quickly. Jake played well for us last year. He's a really dedicated, hard-working player, and he kind of fits the mold of a lot of guys that we've had success with in the back end, guys that came here – he came here as a walk-on, started out as a really good special teams player, impressed us with his attitude from day one, his work ethic, and now we've seen that come to fruition on the field where he's having some success.

There is nothing like experience at any position, certainly back there, and Brandon (Snyder) went through the same thing. The mistakes those guys make sometimes can be really glaring and painful, and I can't think of a safety we had – I referenced Derek Pagel the other night to our guys, the game in 2000 where he took a false step. He wasn't a starter at that point and it cost us a touchdown, probably cost us the game. But that's part of the process. Derek went out to become an outstanding player and a pro player. It's just part of growth. Failure is part of learning.

I think hopefully Jake has learned a lot of good things in this past year, and we really expect him to play well for us this year.

Developing depth is going to be – it's obviously a key focal point right now. Geno Stone gives us the other experienced guy behind our two starters, and then we're working hard to find 4 and 5 there.

Q. The four guys who are suspended, are they practicing?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they're all practicing. They're with the team, full nine yards. The week of the suspension, they'll be on the scout team and they won't be at the game. They'll be doing some other things.

Q. How much does an off season or even off-the-field issues, how does it make you reassess the way you communicate your program's expectations?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think most of the things that happened are things that happen on college campuses across the country, and anybody that's a parent, those are things you worry about, I would imagine, for anybody that's in that 17 to 25 age group. Maybe beyond that, I don't know. I don't think there's anything extraordinary going on, nothing alarming in my mind, but there are things that have to be addressed, and we do have clearly stated expectations that we expect everybody to abide by.

Personally, we hold our older guys to a higher standard than younger guys. We've got a group of young guys right now that really don't know the operation top to bottom. They don't know the pace, the tempo for the most part. We've got some guys that are really doing a great job, but part of our job is to teach them. But once a guy has been in the program for a couple years, I think it's a fair expectation that we have an obligation to lead the way, not be a follower or do things that are tough to explain.

But that's part of coaching. That's part of parenting. It's like being a parent; you address it, you expect improvement and growth as a result of it, and that's what I expect in all four of these cases.

Q. With the departures and suspensions, what have you learned about your team?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think when I talked about our leadership base growing, I think that's one thing we've really witnessed. We've had things – I don't want to – events that have happened historically here any time during the season, sometimes it seems to be – summer seems to be a real interesting time because the training is really intensive and what have you, but things happen within a team's culture or a team's framework, and when guys come forward and are unified with a message, that's really an encouraging thing. A lot of times it can really galvanize football teams. I can think of two specific examples I could give you, but I'm not going to, that I think were really pivotal moments in good teams that we've had, their development.

The good news out of all this in my mind is just the way the team has responded, and I couldn't be more proud and happy with the way the guys have handled this whole thing, and I think there's a real strong commitment to move forward and do it in the right way. But it's easy to talk about things; really going out and doing it on a daily basis, that's what counts, and that's what we'll find out between now and January.

Q. You have such a small senior class; does that give you any pause for concern about leadership issues?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't think so. I think to me it's all about the individuals involved, and we've got 13 guys in that class that I think are all here for the right reasons. They're all committed to the right things, and that's what's important, whether it's 13 or 23 or 33. Realistically we're probably going to be somewhere between 10 and – I can't imagine us being at 25, but maybe that would happen. But it's kind of – it's more about the quality and it's about the individuals, and when I look at those 13 names, I feel good about those guys. It's good to have them out in front of the team, and just really happy, obviously. Aaron Mendis is not able to be where he wants to be right now, but he's still part of the team and a valuable member. He's on the leadership group, so that's selected by the peers. That gives you an idea how they think about him, too.

That's what's important to us. I don't think it has any necessarily weight in terms of the kind of success you can have as a football team.

Q. You mentioned that the logical choice is to replace those suspended guys. What have you liked from the response from them knowing that there's opportunity the first week?

KIRK FERENTZ: I really didn't share it with the team until Tuesday night I guess it was about the last two. Yeah, it's been business as normal. Everybody is practicing, I think, the way you would hope they would. One nice thing that it gives the guys that are going to be in that position an opportunity to get ready, but I was hopeful they'd be getting ready anyway because we really don't have any incumbents on our football team. We have some guys that certainly should be starters as we stand here today. They should be starting in three weeks. But it's everybody's job on the team to go out and – if they have a job, keep it, and more importantly, if they have a job, they need to improve. Those are the guys that really need to be improving as much as anybody.

Kind of gets back to the senior thing. If our best guys aren't doing their best and playing better and practicing better than they have, it's going to be tough for us to think we have a good football team, too.

I think they understand that, but right now we need everybody working because none of us are smart enough, not even in this room, to know who's going to be playing on September 1st or week 8. It's just such a fluid thing, and there's so many things that can happen, and we've had so many examples of that. That's the attitude everybody has to have. That's the mindset everybody has got to have right now, and I think at least we're seeing that from most guys.

Q. Were Jackson and Latimore staring at a larger suspensions, and did they work their way down to a one-game suspension?

KIRK FERENTZ: Pretty much what I said. It's a one-game suspension right now, and everything is fluid obviously for anybody, and again, it just all gets down to the individual player, but I'm comfortable with where we're at right now, and I'm confident that that'll be handled. Hopefully it's the last time we discuss this. But that's up to them right now.

Q. After two decades of being here, you've produced a lot of great players who have gone on to the NFL and become model citizens in their community and are overall just really good people. How does that make you feel?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, good, obviously. That's the end game. That's really our goal. I'm not naïve to the process; if you don't win enough games, you don't get to coach. That's just Division I college football right now. But our bigger goal really is to have guys come back here when they're in their 30s or you get to see them when they're in their 30s and they've got kids, and whatever it is they're doing, they're doing it well. We had a couple legacy events this summer. In fact, it was the last day before vacations kind of kicked in. We were up in Chicago, and seeing some guys from – we had guys from the '80s here. But to see that part of life, that's really what this is all about, and that's, I think, the beauty of sports and the end game anyway. It's all about trying to teach things that are going to help them in adult life, whether it's being a spouse, parent, husband, whatever it may be, father, all that kind of stuff, and obviously a good employee.

Q. Even after so long, all of them have such high regard for you and respect for you –
KIRK FERENTZ: That's because the assistants are hard on them, and I'm nice to everybody. I keep that easy there.

Q. I was just wondering through the years, how much have you changed your policies and rules? I know you don't want to disclose what these guys did, but did they break a rule or policy that's long standing?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think we've been pretty consistent. In 20 years things are going to change, obviously, faces and all that, and we talk about things all the time, and we'll continue to talk as the world is changing, but I think we've been pretty consistent with our approach, whether it's how we practice, how we play or the fundamentals, and same thing with what our expectations are as members of the community.

The bottom line is they represent our program. They're not like other college players, and we tell our guys that all the time. The way we do things isn't necessarily like everybody else does, and that's just – I'm not saying it's right, wrong or indifferent, it's what we decided a long time ago is best for us, and we continually evaluate that and how can we tweak it and make it better.

But there are certain standards we have, and either you abide by them or you don't, and if you don't, then there's a price to pay, and then we move on, also. I'm big on that. I think it's critical. I don't think you can have a doghouse and be a coach or a parent, unless it just becomes a chronic issue, and if it is, then you have to address it.

If I was worried about that, none of the players in question would be on the team right now if that were the case. But it's not, so it's just – it's not my favorite part of the job, but it's part of the job. It's like being a parent. Kids don't always need another friend. That's the bottom line. Sometimes you have to say no, and it's not okay. Let's do it again. We do it on the field all the time. Famous last words: Do it again. Or one more rep.

Q. Akrum Wadley was such a big part of the offense last year and now you've got (Toren) Young and Ivory Kelley-Martin at the running back position on the depth chart. How do you see that sort of shaking out as far as who's used in what situation?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not going to say it's exactly the same, but it's probably similar to when you had LeSean and Akrum. I'm not saying those guys are those guys, but they're similar in a lot of ways. So the way we tried to balance the use of those two guys and then – I'm not going to say Mekhi is like Butler, but he is kind of like Butler. You've got a little bit of a different back in all three of the guys. During my time here we've never had too many backs, that's for sure. I hope it becomes a real – none of these guys have production in Division I football at this point, so hopefully they'll get that going and then hopefully we'll have to strategize how we're going to use them, but I think we're going to need all three, and my guess is we'll have plenty of opportunity to use all three of them.

Q. Offensive line has always been a strength here. How good is this year's offensive line do you think, and who are the leaders there?

KIRK FERENTZ: Like most years, it's going to be a work in progress, and we've got some guys that have played. I think Keegan Render is probably understated, and I told the NFL guys that. They've started coming through, probably nine guys through now the last three days. He's one of those players that I think is better than you think. There's nothing flashy about him. When you guys interview him, he's not going to try to give you any quotes or anything like that, but he's just a quality player. He's developed into a really good leader. He's just so consistent with everything that he does on the field, off the field. I mean, he's really the model of what we're looking for, and to me that's a good starting point for the offensive line. So he's a great role model for the other guys.

But we've got guys like Ross Reynolds when he played last year played very well. He's done extremely well in the out-of-season program, and he's a fifth-year guy, so I'd be really disappointed if he doesn't have a good year.

And then after that, we've got guys that are really learning on the fly and some have gotten good experience, but hopefully their best football is way in front of them right now starting the season.

Q. After year two with your new offensive staff, now that you've developed some chemistry with them, how much more do you guys as a unit understand what you're trying to accomplish on offense?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really kind of interesting, if you look at our staff, it almost parallels our seven-on-seven guys, for lack of a better term. We've got receivers, tight ends, minus the running backs, but the quarterbacks. Last year we had no experience at those positions. Now we think some of our more reliable players are going to be at the receiver, tight end, quarterback position, and the coaching staff is kind of the same way. Our defensive staff has been pretty consistent the last however many years, since Norm retired. And then flipping around, the offense, it was basically all new last year. It's kind of year two for those guys as a staff, kind of year two for the guys that are making a lot of decisions and touching the football, and I think that certainly has got to be an advantage for us.

I'm optimistic it's going to show up in terms of our play, and that's how it's supposed to work.

Q. What have you seen from the new freshmen so far, and is there anybody you would like to contribute at some point?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think there is, and we'll know more probably next time we get together. I alluded to it. The secondary is wide open right now. I think there's an opportunity there, perhaps at linebacker, and especially with this redshirt rule, it gives us a chance to get some guys on the field, maybe get a look at them, when in other years we couldn't. I doubt the receiver position, but you never know. Running back we've got an open mind. And maybe a guy or two on the defensive line. I think that's a possibility. I don't think that would be a stretch.