

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: So, first thing, obviously, what a difference a year makes. Last year was a track meet up-and-down the field, and today was just a great defensive battle by both teams. Thought both teams really played hard, competed hard, and that's exactly what you'd expect in this kind of football game.

Coming into it, we had tremendous respect and still do for their offensive scheme and their players. The running back is a tremendous player. So for our defense to be able to do the things they did today, it really speaks highly of them. Give them a lot of credit. Fought through some tough circumstances, happy about that.

Just overall, it was a tough-hard nosed game, both teams, especially defensively. We were playing it hard, making it difficult on the opposing offenses.

So I think that just kind of ties in with the history of this series. It's always unpredictable. We've had all kinds of games in the history of it. The one common denominator with a few exceptions, they've all been hard fought right to the end, and this was certainly no exception to that.

We're thrilled to get the victory. It was hard-fought, and that's going to help us down the road. Our offense had real struggles during the day, and the course of the day. A lot of those were brought on by the way they played. But we played through it, and obviously the highlight was that long drive, the 83-yard possession, and Brandon Smith coming up with a big stretch there. To get us going a little bit was big.

Obviously, what we have to do right now is refine and keep cleaning things up and try to develop some rhythm, because we don't have enough rhythm right now offensively. But that's going to be our chore here moving forward.

That's really what September is about for us is trying to get our team really game ready and get them where they can play more proficiently. So I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. With the passing game, you struggled all day, and then in the fourth quarter find it?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's like a lot of things in

football, they're hard to explain. They do a really nice job of making it tough to throw the football, and they did that last year. I said on Tuesday, I think, really as much success as they had last year and as well as they played a big, big part that probably didn't get enough play was their defensive play. Again, 20.8 in that conference is tough to do.

They did a great job today. They made it tough to throw, disrupted us, but at least we broke through. We came up with big plays in that last possession, the long possession.

For a guy like Smith to make a play like that, it was a great throw, and it looked like a great throw from where I was standing. Brandon's a young player. He looks like a big player and all that stuff. But he's still a young guy learning how to play. So hopefully that will be good for his confidence, and that's something you can't give young players.

Q. Has he made plays like that every day in practice?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know about every day, but, yeah, yeah, I know what you mean.

Q. He's shown you that he can make some plays?

KIRK FERENTZ: He is, and as I said on the radio, it's a little like Wirfs; Wirfs looks like an NFL guy, but he's still learning how to play up front there. And really get the tempo of things on a regular basis. I described Brandon the same way. He looks like an NFL guy, but he's not playing at that level yet, obviously. That's part of being both second-year guys, they're in high school not that long ago. As long as they keep pushing and working in practice, I think hopefully we can get some good things out of them.

Q. The defense today, you end up with two first time starter linebackers that had to learn a lot.

KIRK FERENTZ: That's really pleasing to see. Jack came back and played a good game today from where I was looking, and Djimon jumped in there and did a nice job. That was really good to see. I think we'll continue to learn more about them as we go.

It was concerning that first possession they had. We had one good possession, and they took that ball right down the field. It looked like we were catching, and

they were the aggressors, they were on the attack. That was a little concerning, but we settled down and really played good defense after that. And that's good to know, good to see.

Q. A health update on some of the guys? Kristian and maybe Ihmir?

KIRK FERENTZ: Welch was available today. He got to work out yesterday and looked pretty good, but just didn't practice during the week, so we didn't want to put him in there. Ivory couldn't go yesterday, so we'll see what he looks like this week. But we're hoping sooner than later.

Q. How about Ihmir?

KIRK FERENTZ: X-rays were negative, so that's a good thing. Landed on his shoulder, I guess, but he'll be okay, he is a tough kid.

Q. If you add up all the point points in two games that you've given up, are you further along than you expected?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I didn't know what to expect, quite frankly. We've got some veteran guys up front that I think are doing a good job of leading, and they're setting tempo for us and we're counting on that, but you never know how that's going to go.

We're really inexperienced at the linebacker position, and neither of our corners really have much experience either. So we're kind of better at the two safety positions from an experience standpoint up front. I think those guys are really helping set the tempo, and it's good to see those other guys join in.

I don't mind telling you, I was a little worried about the receivers too, with the size these guys have and the plays they made last year. So I thought we played really smart defense today, or sound, or whatever the best word is there. We didn't give up easy plays. As you know, last year, we made it a little too easy for them at times and it's hard to win games doing that.

Q. Montgomery, you really limited him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, starting there, and I told the guys he is a little like Barkley, I'm not saying they're the same back, but, boy, you look at what he did last year, all year, not just against us, but I can show you some clips where you better get a lot of guys to the ball.

We tried that last year. We just didn't tackle him, and he ran right through us and over us. This guy's a really good, tough, competitive guy, so he's as good as we're going to face. So I think that's a real credit to our guys to do a little better job tackling and trying to contain him because he's a really dangerous player.

Q. Talk about your two-headed monster in the back field the past few weeks? They both are dependable. So how do you feel you can depend on them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, talked about some other young guys with Smith and Wirfs, and they're both young players that way. Neither of them have much experience at Kinnick. So two games now where they're really doing something out there. And we like what we're seeing.

Mekhi, I mentioned three or four weeks ago where he was really starting after one of those scrimmages he was really getting there. And now you get into the game feel, and it's another set of, you know, fitting in and getting comfortable. But I thought today he did some really good things.

He plays tough, a tremendous young guy. Just delightful. Then Toren's -- he's a tough, hard-nosed guy, and really gives our team good energy, and that's a real positive for us.

Q. You don't have any ready-bodied athletes like A.J. that come in here, but in his first two games it just seems at times when he's allowed to pass rush and in that situation, it's very difficult?

KIRK FERENTZ: We allowed him last year too, he just wasn't doing it. So I'm talking about what we're saying on that theme of young guys. Nobody has had more hype, I think, in the last 19-plus years than A.J. coming in here. And I get that. He's a really good player, good prospect, great kid. But last year he was learning how to play too.

He's thinking about six things at once, and you can't do that. It would be like me trying to golf 30 years ago, you just can't do that.

So what I saw from where I was standing today was a guy playing fast. He had some purpose, and wasn't overthinking this stuff. You've got good attributes, you don't have to be the smartest guy, just go. But he was trying to do too much last year. And the last two weeks, especially today, it looked like he had a little more purpose and was a little more efficient with his intent and the way he was playing.

If we can get that from him on a consistent basis, which is encouraging two weeks in a row, I think he's maybe feeling a little better about what he's doing too.

Q. The pass rush that you have, eight sacks in two games going forward. You have a lot of depth, but you also have a lot of good athletes.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think those guys are having fun. They're working hard, having success. They've worked

extremely hard. One guy, again, doesn't pass the sexy test is Parker Hesse, right, but boy this guy just shows up. He really sets tempo for us up front.

Matt today did some good things. He's coming off that injury from the spring, getting some confidence. Anthony has been slippery and tough out there, and I think our inside guys are doing a pretty good job.

Sam Brincks, you know how I feel about him. Those guys are just improving on a daily basis.

If we can get the other side of the ball to kind of do the same thing up front, that's going to give us a chance to be a decent football team here.

Q. Keegan Render, how do you feel he's playing and what is his upside?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't say enough. I just mentioned Parker and I put them in the same category. A guy that's played a lot of football here for us. Doesn't say a lot, but boy, he's a leader, and everybody responds to him. He's so steady and good with the younger guys too. And we get some young guys up there from the experience standpoint, so it's been really good.

Q. In the game with the grind from start to finish, especially one early in the season, how valuable is that to learn how guys handle adversity and game-like speed? How much more does that teach you about what you have in the grind like this?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really important. First of all, it's the nature of college football. Typically, as the games, we're going to have probably 12 of those, and every now and then you get one or two that isn't, but that's not something you can predict here.

Then in this series, that's what we expected. We expected this thing to be a full 60 minutes last year. It was more than that. That's part of a team, learning how to do things. I think our team's toughness today kept us in the game. Then fortunately in that fourth quarter we found a little, reached down and did some things that were really positive.

So I'm hoping offensively we can learn from that. It's there. We've just got to dig a little deeper, and push it through a little better. But getting that touchdown, that was a really big possession for us.

Q. How much is the D-line helping the linebackers sort things out? It seems that they're in a place where you want them?

KIRK FERENTZ: Certainly not hurting, guarantee you. And it makes it a lot easier as you know to play back there if you have some guys doing a good job. Coming into this season I was a little -- I don't know if concern

is the right word, but curious to see how we play inside. Felt really good about our ends.

Sam really slid in there with this camp and really did a good job. The guy's just so coachable. Does things really well in a non-flashy way. That whole group of guys inside are starting to pick it up a little bit. So Matt had a big day today, so hopefully we'll keep those guys going.

Q. What do you feel about the offense in the two games?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're sporadic. We're hit or miss right now. We don't have a rhythm. We haven't showed sustained. So we'll keep pushing. That's usually the hardest thing to do. Hardest thing to establish. We'll talk about the month of September, again, it's really the task. It's out there.

How do we develop a little more rhythm and get things going a little better? We'll keep swinging the bat, but it will come. Guys are working hard and we've got the right guys.

Q. Thoughts on going into UNI next week?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a big week for us. I've kind of encouraged our guys. It's a little tough this week to do that, but it's not about who you're playing, it's about us trying to improve. We're running a race now to improve. There are a lot of obvious things we need to get better at between now and next Saturday, and some things that probably aren't so obvious either.

One thing I would say, our special teams looked like they played pretty well today. We missed a couple field goals, but outside of that, overall, it looked like we were doing the things we were supposed to. But there is always plenty we have to work on.

It's a 12-week race. It really is. With a little break in there after four. So our focus right now is what can we do in the month of September.

Q. Was there anything you told Miguel after that first few pulls to keep him in it?

KIRK FERENTZ: Shake it off. Flush that and come on back. He's a veteran player. He's going through his ups and downs, but last year he gained everybody's confidence. He prepares well. He's so conscientious. There are no negatives I can give you.

That's part of being out there. If you're a specialist, it's kind of like a relief pitcher, nobody wants to sit next you, one of those shots. But he's kicking the ball well and he's going to have a good year for us.

Q. Just curious, with the unique situation of this

being your second game and this being their first game, when you look back at how the week went, was it an advantage, disadvantage, not a big deal?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really hard to quantify, quite frankly. To that point, I thought for them they played five snaps, I think three special teams-wise. But they looked a lot more polished than we did a week ago with their play. They looked more cohesive than we did.

The biggest challenge for us was our offensive tact. Trying to figure out who they'd be, what they'd be schematically. They played some plays against us today that maybe we didn't anticipate, and it took us a while to get adjusted. I'm not sure we did fully. So that was a little bit of a curveball for us.

But the guys hung in there. They kept pushing. We did some good things, wasn't consistent enough. Again, I think the story of their team last year, the unwritten story is the defensive polish. Those guys are well-coached and they play really hard so we have a lot of respect for that group.