

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, September 18, 2018

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon.

The celebration this week is always a special thing. Unbelievable the people that have been recognized by the Iowa Farm Bureau. This year is certainly no exception. I want to extend my congratulations to Aaron and his family for his selection. To me, Aaron stands for everything that's good for college football, about being a Hawkeye. Aaron embodies those things. A tremendous recipient, I am very happy for him.

Captains this week are Parker Hesse, Nate Stanley, Keegan Render, Brady Ross on special teams. Those four guys will represent the team.

Looking back for one second, really pleased with our effort the other night. Thought the guys played hard, did a lot of good things. Certainly the scores around the country indicate every week, but certainly Saturday, there are no givens in college football. You have to show up and play every week. I think our guys have done that three straight weeks now.

Every game has been a little bit different test for our guys. They've met the challenge and done a good job.

Last thing, I want to thank our fans one more time, last Saturday was a great environment in Kinnick. It always is. There is a little extra energy when there are night games at Kinnick. That was great to be out there. We're certainly counting on that energy again this weekend, realizing we have to help sustain things. We are looking forward to a great crowd on Saturday.

Speaking of Saturday, we turn our attention to Wisconsin. Obviously we're playing a very good football team. It's great to open the Big Ten, especially great to open it against a top-notch team like Wisconsin. They have an outstanding program, have for some time.

When Barry Alvarez went up there back in '89, '90, that winter, he certainly had a vision. I think that program has embodied his vision for many years now. They're built, strong and physical front on both sides of the football. Have a great running game. Played great defense traditionally, great special teams.

I think when you look at this team, you're seeing the

same thing right now. The foundation of their team, their offensive line is not only big, but they're outstanding, veteran, very skilled, very adept at what they do. They play well together. Very cohesive group.

We just played an outstanding running back two weeks ago. I mentioned he might be the best in the country. If he's not, it might be the one we're playing this week. This guy is just a tremendous football player, too. It's unusual when you play two guys of this caliber within a two-week span. That's what we're facing.

They're not the same exact runner, but I can't imagine many guys in the country better than either of these guys. We witnessed this, how good Taylor was firsthand last year. He is really a great player.

The quarterback has played well for them. To me he was the glue guy, the leader of their football team last year, the guy that led them to a great season. He's throwing the ball effectively and efficiently. Over 60 percent throwing.

I think one thing, their receiver corps just in general has really done a good job. They've continually gotten better over the last couple years. Very strong group of receivers.

The young tight end has played extremely well. Had a great game Saturday. He looks to be a very comfortable target for the quarterback. They're very, very multiple, very diverse, balanced on offense.

Defensively, they've been good for a long time. This is no exception. They're under 14 points a game, under 300 yards given up. Just a very strong, aggressive defense. Typical of Wisconsin football. Special teams are very veteran. Good core players. A lot of young players playing on their core teams. They're doing a great job, veterans with their specialists. A very balanced, talented football team, a team that knows how to win, what it takes to win. They certainly believe in each other. It's going to be a big, big challenge for us.

Overall, it's been a great series through the years. We've had a lot of good games with Wisconsin. We're going to have to play our best to make it that type of game. A trophy game, so that's always important.

Adds a little bit to it.

Bottom line, it's just a great challenge for our football team. We'll learn a lot about where we're at on Saturday in terms of the kind of progress we need to make, if we're going to have a chance to play against the top-level football teams.

Q. Last year's game, you seemed to not fully commit to running on second down, which led to disaster on third down.

KIRK FERENTZ: Nice way to put it, yeah (laughter). Pretty accurate, though.

Q. When you look back, do you think you were too impatient with the running game at times last year?

KIRK FERENTZ: One thing about them typically, they make you earn everything. Patience is part of that equation. However you want to look at it. We just weren't able to sustain. Part of it was a good play they made, but there's sometimes where we didn't convert what I call makeable plays. If you're playing a team that's as good on defense as Wisconsin is traditionally, to have a chance, you've got to make the makeables, you have to make those at a high percentage. It's going to be tough to make the other ones.

To me, that was a big part of it. We left the door open in just about every area. Did good things defensively in the first part of the game. We're going to have to build, somehow generate something to sustain some drives. They make that tough on you.

Right along with that, we didn't help ourselves field position-wise. We started inside the 10 on two punts we didn't field. To me that's a makeable play. That really affected field position, which affects play calling. A lot of things that factor into it.

That's part of the beauty of the way they play. They keep continual pressure on you. If you make mistakes like that, they compound a little bit. Makes the hill a little bit steeper to climb.

Q. How much progress do you see when you look at that film versus what your offense is doing right now?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's hard to compare. It's almost apples and oranges right now. Plus it's last year and this year.

I think we made progress each week along the way here. We're doing some things better. Now we're moving into conference play. We have nine games. We got a lot of room for improvement. If we're going to have the kind of season we want to have, we have to keep improving weekly. That's been the biggest thing

for our football team, how can we clean up our play and keep getting better.

Q. What was BYU able to do?

KIRK FERENTZ: Their execution was really good. They played well. They made some nice plays. They competed hard, which again that's a given if you're going to beat Wisconsin.

I heard this on the radio somewhere in the last couple days, first time they lost a non-league game at home since 2002 or '03, something like that. The odds are against you at some point, one thing I'd say. BYU played a really good game. They caught them a couple times. It took a really good effort. That's what it's going to take for us.

Q. Do you have to talk about mistakes with your team this week? It's apparent?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a conference game. Every game's important. They all count on your résumé. They all count at the end of the year. Anybody that plays in a conference, which is just about everybody now, I think conference games do take special significance.

The bottom line, it's one out of nine. They're all equally important. This is the one in front of us right now. It's a big game certainly. It's a trophy game. There's no denying that. Good that we're playing every year.

Q. The fact that Wisconsin, its dominance in the Big Ten, road goes through Madison in the west, right?

KIRK FERENTZ: The last couple years it has, for sure. But whether we win this game or lose the game, still eight weeks of football left, no matter what happens. We'll deal with it either side. It's a long season. This is a big game, a conference game.

Q. Why has Wisconsin defended you so well?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's interesting to me, they switched their systems defensively. Four or five years now, six years, I can't remember. Five, I guess. Whenever Coach Andersen went there, they shifted their scheme. The interesting part to me, I mean, any good defense, no matter whether you're odd scheme, even scheme, there's certain things you do well. What amazed me was the transition, how easily they transitioned. I was a little curious about how that was going to go. That was impressive. They transitioned almost seamlessly. More impressive, a pretty veteran team, a year later they lost a ton of guys. We were playing them about this time of year, fourth, fifth game. They were better statistically than they had been with a veteran group the year before. That really caught my attention.

I think what it explains, they have a certain temperament they play with. They're a team that plays with excellent technique. They're rarely out of place. They work hard to the ball. Everybody on that team works hard to the ball.

As a result, they've been really good at points allowed. They've been really good at that over the last at least five years. At least the last five years they've been really good. One thing we know going in, points are going to be hard to come by. That's the way it's been in this series.

Q. They play multiple, a little bit more four front than three against you. The fact that you guys have played against two teams that play a lot of three and four, how will that help you prepare for a team as multiple as Wisconsin?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the good news is, in this series, we kind of know who they are, I think they know who we are. That's the good news. Bad news is we know who they are. They give up 12 points a game or 10 points a game. That's the challenge.

Typically good teams -- let me rephrase that. Probably the thing that's significant here, they've had a philosophy in place, they've had a staff that's been in place. That's true of a couple of the opponents we play. But it's amazingly uncommon in college football. It just seems like every three years, you're looking at a new menu there when you face somebody.

In the case of Wisconsin, they've got DNA that has been pretty consistent. A couple other teams in our conference are the same way. At least from a preparation standpoint, when we look at film, we can say, Okay, this is probably what we can expect. Now the challenge is how do you crack the safe? It's hard because these guys are really good at what they do.

Q. You had young offensive linemen trying to figure that out last year. They played with a different style and tempo. Multiple fronts. Do you think now they are more comfortable against the scheme?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll find out Saturday. Big thing last year, we clearly failed the test last year. We couldn't sustain anything. We couldn't make anything go. Part of that was them, a big part of that was us, too. We had a hand in it too. The challenge is what can we do better. They're going to play well. How do we better execute, how do we better get into things that we'll maybe have some success with. It's a tough challenge.

Q. Postgame, it was mentioned this being a four-game segment. How do you as a staff decide -- players talked about it building, this is the end of

segment one of our season.

KIRK FERENTZ: I really hardly pay attention to our schedule until sometime in August. That may sound bad. But you look at it, we have a four-game block here. Just so happens we had four weeks leading up to the first game.

If you do the math, at the end of next week, after our bye week, we'll be right in the middle of where we're at. Difference is you have pre-season. Those first couple games take a long time to get into a routine. The last eight weeks are going to go by like that.

The bye week, we're done on Sunday here. We get a little break. The focus point was just let's take a look at these first four weeks, we'll figure out where we're at afterwards. Once you get going, it's week by week. Everybody does that.

There's nothing scientific. It just came to me one night.

Q. With that concentration on these first four weeks, has the bar been higher for freshmen?

KIRK FERENTZ: Those first three were important, too.

Q. Has the bar been higher for players? This four weeks is really important for you guys.

KIRK FERENTZ: No, not really. With the new rule, if anything, we're more tempted to play freshmen. We're trying to win. Again, I think Saturday is a really good illustration of it. You look nationally, there are no gimmes. Those 'gimme games' they may happen. I can't remember the last time we had one when we were going into one. We have tried to give ourselves the best chance to win, look like we can start getting some momentum, that type of thing. It's an ongoing battle.

We're going to put our best guys out there, whatever classification they may be, based on what we see in practice, how they're performing, executing. Obviously health and those things factor into it, as well. We're just trying to play one game at a time and win that game.

Q. You mentioned freshmen. With Tyrone Tracy, do you have the four game thing in mind or has he been showing you something in practice?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's done some good things. We're a little thin. We didn't want to get somebody at that point in the game knocked out for a couple weeks here. We wanted to give him a chance. We were able to do it free, which was great. He actually made a play, which was better. Got up after he was nailed. That was good to see.

Q. When you used to take the drive to Madison,

when you were an assistant coach, beautiful fall weather, did you ever think how does this program not be successful against Wisconsin? When Barry took it over, did you think this place is going to take off?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's interesting. First time we went up there in '81, can't tell you if it was late October, early November, if they beat us, they were in the driver's seat, still a month left to play, for the Rose Bowl. I remember we beat them. A tough game.

I also remember we practiced a double pass, which I've seen two of them on film already this year. We practiced the double pass I bet you 10 times. Sure enough they hit one for a touchdown. Randy was the quarterback on that team. That was a great ballgame.

Then they dipped off there for a couple years. I can't explain that. When they dipped down, to say they'd be where they are now, I don't think anybody would have predicted that in 1988 or '9.

People make a difference, I really believe that. I think Barry had a vision when he went up there. Barry has a good football mind, obviously. They put a good staff together. Those players really believed in what they were doing.

I was watching from afar. Really only three programs I paid attention to were Iowa, for obvious reasons, Wisconsin and Kansas State for obvious reasons, too. Guys I'd worked with. Both what Barry was doing and Bill did at K State was similar to what happened here in the '80s.

I think what Coach Fry did here is evidence, all three of those are evidence, that people make a difference. They can be impactful if you get enough people doing things together.

Q. For a guy like Jack Hockaday, who came in with impressive high school credentials but at times feels like his career may have hit a wall, and then to take advantage of his one last opportunity, how fun is that to watch?

KIRK FERENTZ: To me that's the beauty of college sports, the beauty of sports in general. If this was the NFL, he might not be here right now. Might be a younger guy that had taken his job.

You think back a couple years ago, Cole Fisher had a similar circumstance when Cole played on special teams. If you had given us all truth serum, I don't think anybody in spring before would have said he'd be our weak side backer on a football team. He played a great season of football in '15. That's what we're seeing Jack do. The door opened for him. Most

importantly he was prepared. He was eager to go in and do a good job. He's playing good for us.

I'll go back to '81. Ron Holmstrom hadn't played a snap that counted. He ended up being a first-round pick. You learn from your history. If a guy has a good attitude, if he's giving good effort, you don't give up on him. As long as they're trying, doing things the way they ought to be doing them, you never know how it's going to turn out. That's one of the beauties of sports. Hopefully he's going to go on and have a great year for us.

I think that's one of the great things about sports.

Q. Fair to say that you and Wisconsin recruit a lot of the same players? How hard is it to recruit in Wisconsin?

KIRK FERENTZ: Kind of yes and no. Barry's first visions, I think like any smart coach, you're going to try to control your state. But, yeah, I think we look for the same things I think probably in players. That's probably fair. As far as getting the guys, they've done a pretty good job of that.

Q. Dalton Ferguson, you talk about him coming back from injuries and stuff. In the past two weeks he's gotten more responsibilities on his plate. How would you describe him now, not only as a football player, but off the field, added responsibility as a father?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a neat story. Think about the other night, where his kids are on the other end of the wave. Pretty neat there.

Dalton has been a great kid since he got in the program. Worked hard. Quietly goes about his business. Then had to contend with a knee injury, which is not fair, but it's part of sports unfortunately. Everything comes his way. He handles it levelheadedly and steady.

He's jumped in and done a really nice job for us. Really pleased for him. Hopefully his whole season goes well for him. He's doing a great job.

Q. They're getting a lot of the same guys you get. The way they fuel the 3-4, does that open your eyes a little bit?

KIRK FERENTZ: To copy it, you mean?

Q. Copy it maybe.

KIRK FERENTZ: We're pretty comfortable with what we're doing, too. Again, they were playing good defense prior to that shift. They made the shift. I think it's kind of like when we were hiring a coordinator back when we hired Norm. I wasn't fixated on a 3-4, 4-3. I

was fixated on getting the right people.

Came as a D coordinator from Utah State, whatever year that was, '14, I think, get my math right here. Playing for two years. Dave is an outstanding coach. I don't want to speak for Coach Andersen, but you hire people that are good coaches that really believe in what they do, then let them do that. It's got to blend in with what you are philosophically.

As it pertained to us, I wanted a guy that was going to be a good defensive coach, but a teacher, play blocks, tackle well, not give up easy plays, that type of thing. That's what good defenses do.

I don't see any compelling reason to change what we are doing. I think we play good defense, too. When we're playing, we play good defense. Kind of personal taste, I guess.

Q. The injured players that didn't play?

KIRK FERENTZ: Today is our first real workday. They worked today. Hopefully they don't wake up sore tomorrow. We'll keep our fingers crossed. I think they all have a chance to be ready for the game.

Q. Aaron Kampman was with you when you turned the corner. What sticks about him when he was on your roster?

KIRK FERENTZ: Where do I start? Quick story about him. We had a handful of guys that were just special players. They would have been special players at any time in any program. You think about a guy like Matt Bowen was a senior, Aaron, Dallas Clark, fourth-team linebacker. Bruce Nelson. Sterling attitudes. Aaron was one of the heavily recruited guys, as I understand it. He was our middle linebacker in '99.

He was one of the several guys I talked to about position changes after the season. Here is a guy who is your middle linebacker who is a really good player, productive player. But my thought was for his personal future, he might be better off playing defensive end. Thought that would move him more into an elite group athletically in the conference, where he is kind of middle of the pack, middle linebacker, might be more impactful at that point.

You present that to a player. Like with Nelson, he was fifth string tight end, so it doesn't matter, right? He would have done anything. Dallas same thing. McCann helped on that one. For Aaron, who is an established player, I thought that might not go so well. He was more receptive to it. I think that's a really good illustration of the kind of guy Aaron is, a team guy all the way.

He trusted us. Really didn't know us to that extent at

that point. But he trusted us. It worked out well for everybody. I think he led the league in sacks his senior year.

There's a lot of things I don't understand, the cut blocking rule. We got screwed again on that one. But anyway, of all 20 years, him not going to the combine, I've called the league one time, I called and said, You guys are making a mistake. He's better than 20%. I was wrong. He was better than 85 or 90% of the guys there. They left a Pro Bowl player not at the combine. That was ridiculous, too.

What a football player. Beyond that, what a human being. Third guy from AP. Coach Thomas would be very proud. What a phenomenal legacy that is. Just a phenomenal human being, teammate, husband, father. You name it, he's unbelievable action stellar.

Q. What were your opinions when the conference decided to go East-West?

KIRK FERENTZ: It was kind of weird we didn't play Illinois, too. That was like five years. When you go through expansion, I'm not providing any commentary other than when you go through expansion, it's hard to make everything work. That's what we were going through.

Me personally, my personal preference is for geographic matchups. I think it just makes sense from the fan standpoint. It makes sense on every level in my mind. Trends come and go, all this and that.

It's funny. I hear the radio when I come in and go out. They were talking about a certain team in the SEC, they had a three-game stretch. Well, one of the teams they were mentioning just got beat 60 something to 7. The other team won four games last year. Sometimes this perception stuff trumps reality. They have a murderous three-game stretch. Hold it. I'm not picking on that geographic region. I'm saying in college football, things change every day. Last Saturday is a great example. Teams that aren't supposed to win can win.

Every game is tough. It's challenging. The challenge for coaches is to make sure players understand that, that every week you go out there, if you're not ready, you're going to get humbled. That's the great thing about football. There was a time where that wasn't always the case, certain teams that they don't have to be as prepared. But in our case, that's what it is. No matter who we're playing, we need to be ready to go. It's going to be a tough day. We've had a few of those. Those aren't fun.