

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Tuesday, October 1, 2019

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Certainly, we are pleased with last week's game. I thought the team did a good job practicing coming off a bye week, getting ready, showed up, and played a good game. Like anything, though, there's a lot of things off the film that we can still improve on. It'll be that way all season long, so that is the challenge of moving forward is trying to improve during the course of the week and also matching up against an opponent, in this case an outstanding opponent.

Our captains this week are the same four guys: Nate Stanley, Michael Ojemudia, Kristian Welch, and Brady Ross. Those four will lead us.

Injury-wise we have a couple guys working back right now, Jackson, Merriweather and Brents all practiced today, and they looked like they came out of it okay. So we'll let them work all week, see how they look, but hopefully we'll start getting some guys back on the field instead of losing guys.

Looking at Michigan, things really haven't changed since the first time I was ever exposed to them in person, 1981. First of all, they're one of the premier football programs in the history of the college football. They've been good for a long time, and when you look at them, typically they're very talented. That's certainly the case with this group. Pretty much at every position they have good skill, good talent, and good ability. So that has been pretty consistent.

Typically when you play a Michigan team, they're well-coached, and it's the same thing here.

All that being said, we're traveling up to a very historic stadium, one of the biggest stadiums in the country, and it's just a great environment for college football, so something I think anybody can be excited about, having a chance to compete in that environment.

As we move forward, we know we have a great challenge on our hands right now. We need a great week of preparation, and we'll have to play our absolute best to have a chance to be successful in this thing, and that's really the challenge in front of our team right now. But we're off to a good start and hopefully we'll have a good week and be at our best on Saturday.

Q. Jackson right now, is he going to start, or is he going to be a rotational guy on Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: It depends how the week goes. He looked good today and the film looked good. As long as he can keep progressing -- if he's capable, certainly we'll start him. He's one of our starters. I can't say enough about the job Levi has done and everybody, we've been shifting guys around, but my guess is we'll continue to rotate the guys at least for the next couple weeks.

Q. Ultimately has this been a healthy exercise as far as getting guys back and getting the experience for Levi and for the other guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, any time you can survive injuries to starters and guys can go in and play and hopefully not just get by but play well, that's a positive certainly because that's how you build depth. There's no better way than game competition. You can't substitute that.

The whole trick is surviving it, and I think the offensive line has done a pretty good job of managing the bumps through the first four weeks, and getting AJ back will certainly help us, and hopefully we'll be a more diversified group now.

Q. It feels like that's where the offensive line growth has been, in depth. Has that shown so far this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: It has. Really we came into the season with two proven starters up front, with our two tackles, AJ and Tristan, and then we certainly felt good about Tyler Linderbaum's progress, but the guy had never played center before, and he's a second-year player. I think we probably thought of him differently than he really was in reality. But those three guys, we felt pretty stable going into the season and then what's going to happen at guard, all those kinds of things.

But yeah, we've seen a lot of improvement and growth. Obviously we lost Kyler, and that hurt, but we'll get him back here in a couple weeks, but the other guys are stepping up, Kallenberger, both Paulsons playing good football, Banwart I thought played better Saturday, so it's encouraging to see some growth.

Q. You're running the ball about 56 percent, the

same as last year. Yards per carry significantly up, yards per gain significantly up. In a nutshell, what do you see?

KIRK FERENTZ: Part of it's the blocking. So far, four games into it, our line has done a pretty good job, but the level of competition goes up this week, certainly. I'll also throw in our receivers; I think they're doing a good job. Brandon Smith in particular is doing a nice job, coming in there, digging safeties out, those types of things, and we've talked about this pretty consistently probably since the end of spring ball. I think we've seen a lot of progress with our running backs and receivers, and certainly the older three guys are the same three guys they were a year ago, but they're better football players than last season at any time.

And then you throw Goodson in there, too, he's giving us a little juice. But I think all those guys -- at least the three returning guys -- are playing better now than they have at any time in their career, and that's the key to success for any football team is guys moving forward and improving.

Q. The guys out there constantly, you can tell they understand the value of possession and value of football turnover margin. Where did you learn that lesson and why it's so important in football?

KIRK FERENTZ: I guess coming here in 1981, I remember Coach Fry. He said, before you're going to win, you can't lose games, and Ted Marchibroda said more games are lost than won. Those old axioms are really true. But you look at the '81 ball club, we were not prolific offensively by any stretch of the imagination, but we had a pretty salty defense, had the best punter in the world, not in college football but in the world at that time, and pretty solid kicking game.

We found a way to be successful that year, but protecting the ball is paramount. To me it's no different than tackling well on defense. If you don't do those things consistently then you'd better be more talented than every opponent you play, and that's hard to do.

Q. Why do you think this year's team so far has been really good about protecting the ball?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, part of it's experience and then part of it's concentration, too. I think those two things help us. For the most part guys touching the football have some experience, and then guys that are in those positions, and then concentration is something everybody is capable of, but it's all those things have to go together, and fundamentals on top of it. But that's concentration, too.

Q. Wisconsin's victory the other day versus Michigan, was it simply they started by dominating the line of scrimmage and it just kind of went

there?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I know where my vote for best running back in the country would go right now. Just watching him play is pretty good. I don't mean that to diminish other people's work that's out there, but sometimes games like that happen to teams, good teams. We've seen that before, and we've been victimized by that ourselves. But it was one of those days, Wisconsin just played a tremendous football game, and it just wasn't Michigan's day. But I've got to say that back is pretty special, too.

Q. You mentioned Tyler Goodson. He seems to add an extra gear when he's out there. When did you feel like he could really contribute?

KIRK FERENTZ: We really liked him in recruiting, needless to say. Really until you get them on campus you're not quite sure what they look like in person. I was thinking about Abdul Hodge in that regard, the first time standing behind him in a -- not a scrimmage situation but practice situation. He was quicker than I anticipated, I guess, and so that's part of it.

And then part of it is just how do they react to the circumstances they're being put into, and this is very different than playing in high school. Just like guys that go to the NFL, it's another step for them, too.

I think the thing that's really impressed all of us right from the start with him is he just seems to be pretty much unaffected by whatever situation we put him in, and again, you go to flashback moments to Tony Moeaki had that ability, too, when he showed up. It just seemed like whatever we asked him to do, he did it pretty well, and Tyler kind of has that ability, too, and he's a very humble guy, very hard-working guy and a really good teammate, so it's been great to have him on our team. Great addition.

Q. Seems like almost every signature-type season in the last 40 years has included a win over Michigan, other than maybe the '15 year, '02 going there, '09 here, back in '81, '85. What is it about that opponent in particular that makes those games almost so special and unique?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll go right back to the first thing I said. They are a premier program in the history of college football. I mean, it's in the numbers. It documents it. There are a very small, maybe handful plus, teams that can say that, and they're one of them. It's on paper, and more importantly it's on the field. When you look at their teams, it's hard to find a team that's struggled. It's just really hard to find one.

Q. When did you really put a lot of value in time of possession? When did you in your career figure that out, and why do you stick with that in the

world of microwave offenses, microwave points just flying off the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think all of us have to be comfortable with who we are and what we are. That's part of it, as individuals, and then certainly what your team is going to be. Hopefully you put some thought into that and have basis for that, but we just feel like that's our best chance to win.

But every team is a little bit different, too. I'll go back to '04 when we couldn't run the ball, period, and we found a way to win that year. That's ultimately what you try to do. But in a perfect world, at least for us, if we can hold the ball a little bit, that's going to be a good thing. I do know this: It certainly helps your defensive production if you've got possession of the football. It gives the defense a chance to rest, but more importantly, they can't give up yards or plays when they're sitting on the bench. So that's a good thing, too.

But there are a lot of different ways to be successful, it's just kind of the way we are right now. That would help us if we can control that part of the game.

Q. Looking at Michigan on film defensively, they like to throw a lot of different looks out there. What kind of challenge is that for the offense in terms of game planning for them going into Saturday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we played a really aggressive group last week. I mentioned that. And ditto it after the game. Those guys come after you hard. This isn't exactly the same. It's a different scheme and different form of pressure, what have you. But they have a clear identity on defense, and it's worked for them very, very well for several years. So going into the game, we know points are going to be really tough to come by. It's a different style than Iowa State, but Iowa State, we knew that was going to be a challenge.

So going in, it's going to be a different form of a challenge here, but they've got really good players. They play extremely hard, and they've got a tough scheme to prepare for.

Q. Any chance for Hankins or Reiff this week or --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they couldn't work today, so I just don't see that happening. Hopefully we're getting closer. I think we're moving forward with all the guys that are still out, but yeah, just one of those deals.

Q. What do you expect from Brents? He was a starter last year. Is he going to be a contributor, start over Johnson? What do you think?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, it was really more by circumstance last year, and that's where we were at. And we've been in that situation already this year, so it would be nice to have some options at least. I guess

that's the deal. But I really see him hopefully helping out on special teams this week, and maybe in some sub packages, things like that. But right now DJ and OJ are our two -- we've got two initial guys. Anyway, they're our two starters at corner right now. That's how we're looking at it.

Q. What about safety? Koerner has played three games, Merriweather played one. Is it Koerner right now, and if you go to cash, who's kind of that cash player?

KIRK FERENTZ: I haven't thought that far ahead, but it might be Belton. He got in there a little bit last week. To answer the question, right now Koerner has got a 3-1 edge in experience. Kaevon came in as the starter, but he came in and played one game. It's not the same discussion as Jackson who's played two years for us now. We know who he is and what he is.

But you'll see both those guys playing, and the way it's worked out, I think everybody is going to have plenty of opportunity.

Q. Banks and Stanzi had big games the two times you won there. Do you need that out of a quarterback in that type of environment?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know if you'll see it, but it sure helps. If your quarterback plays well at home or away, it's a good thing, and the way we're wired, that's certainly a good thing, too.

Nate is a veteran guy. That experience I think certainly helped him on the road last time out. That was a really tough environment. Again, I say people outside of the state really can't appreciate -- I think people around here get it, but that's a tough place for us to play, just like I think it's tough when they come here. So the intensity of that series and being on the road and the conditions there, that's really great preparation for playing in tough stadiums in our conference. Again, having a veteran quarterback I think is certainly a plus. It doesn't guarantee anything, but it's certainly a plus.

Q. Have you heard anything over the years as a coach that kind of helped -- use as guide ropes when your team goes on the road? Are there any principles that you've kind of followed over the years?

KIRK FERENTZ: Maturity helps. Experience and maturity help. But really the trick is just to focus on the game, as simple as that sounds. But it's like everything. Focusing on what's important, it's tougher and tougher to do than any other time we've ever had probably, so I think that's really the key is understanding that once the game gets going, it's all about the game, and it's all about our preparation and staying focused on that. I think that's probably the biggest thing.

But it's no different than a couple weeks ago. If you go in there wide eyed and you're paying attention to everything going on outside of what's going on on the field, it's going to work to your disadvantage.

Older guys tend to understand that better, but it's still a challenge.

Q. Do you feel like your team is veteran in the right spots to combat that at quarterback, defensive line?

KIRK FERENTZ: So far we've been a group that's focused pretty well. Last week was a different kind of challenge, but it was a challenge nonetheless, so yeah, I think so far we're passing the test week to week, and this is going to be a whole new challenge for us. What we went through two weeks ago was a unique challenge and a tough challenge. This one will be even tougher. You keep learning as you go along.

Q. In '81 everybody kind of points to the first game against Nebraska as the win that kind of kicked off the era, but the win at Michigan was a conference game, defending league champion. To win the way you did and of course I think they would have won the league had they won that game, what did that do for the team, and what was the moment like?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it was certainly big for the team. It was big for the program, also. It was Coach Fry's third year trying to build, climbing the ladder, and that's 19 years of futility before that actually.

Those first two wins at home were huge. That loss was huge, also, probably a great learning experience. Sometimes you have to go backwards to go forwards. But I think, yeah, the gravity of that whole trip up there, to beat a really good team on the road in a tough environment, something that hadn't been done in two decades basically, that was certainly significant, and that gives you a chance to build as you move along.

So that was a really significant day. At some point you've got to win on the road, too. Winning at home is great and that's important, but you've got to win on the road, and to do in a tough environment like that, that was really a big day for us.

Q. You guys were really good on special teams --

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it was the next week didn't do so well, I think. Was that Minnesota the next week? All of a sudden we're living in a whole different altitude up there, boy, and it was like, oh, okay, here we go.

Q. You were really good on special teams in that game in '81. How confident do you feel? Your special teams have played really well. You've got a

kicker who's made 10 out of 11 going into this game.

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, they're going to be important because if we're playing well then it's going to be a close game. Special teams are always big just like the ball security thing. Those things factor in when it's a tight ballgame, and we seem to be in a lot of those. So the first challenge for us is to make it sticky and make it tight, and then we've got to be good on special teams.

But it's not a given. They've got really good specialists, first of all. Their kicker, punter, as good as you're going to find. They've got two kickers and then they've got a punter that led the Big Ten last year. They've got great return guys, so it's going to be a challenge. We're going to have to really be working hard, and there are some things we still can get better at, too, so hopefully we'll improve as the week goes here.

Q. When you assess the pass rush and statistics don't tell the whole story obviously with what AJ Epenesa has done, are you concerned about it, or do you think that their performance has been good enough that it hasn't really mattered?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I think we're playing pretty good defense overall. The way I'd characterize it, I think we're playing pretty good team defense. The guys for the most part, they haven't been sitting back there just holding the ball and being able to pick our secondary apart. I think we're playing with good tempo. And the coverage has been pretty good, too. So for the most part we've blown a couple things, obviously. A couple of them were very, very obvious. But if we can minimize those things and just keep working up front -- but you talk about a challenge, these guys have four guys back. They're huge, they're well-coached, so it's going to be tough to get there.

Q. You hit the four game mark with those four freshmen initially. You said they're all full go before

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KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we're still kind of pushing ahead. Hudson I think will probably be the guy. Was he one of the four? I don't know about him. I don't think he's played in maybe one or two so far. He's probably fourth out of the four.

Q. Belton, is he in the plans now or is this a one-game deal?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll see. Belton and Campbell are two guys that we're considering for sure right now, so we'll see.

Q. Why have the Michigan high school players that you've seemed to bring in flourished, whether it's Desmond -- obviously got two or three starters right now. Seems like a lot of the guys have

ascended to be really good players.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think credit there goes to Phil Parker for -- and that's kind of how we have to be. We have to see diamonds in the rough typically -- not 100 percent, but usually the home state schools don't offer guys that we recruit out of state. You've got to find something there that we think will mesh well with our program. You think about guys like Desmond or Chauncey and Cedrick on this team, those guys, they've really -- but they've grown in the program. They weren't quite ready to go. Although Desmond jumped in there and did a heck of a job as a young player. But yeah, just -- and part of it's luck. You have to know what you're looking for, but a little bit of luck helps, too.