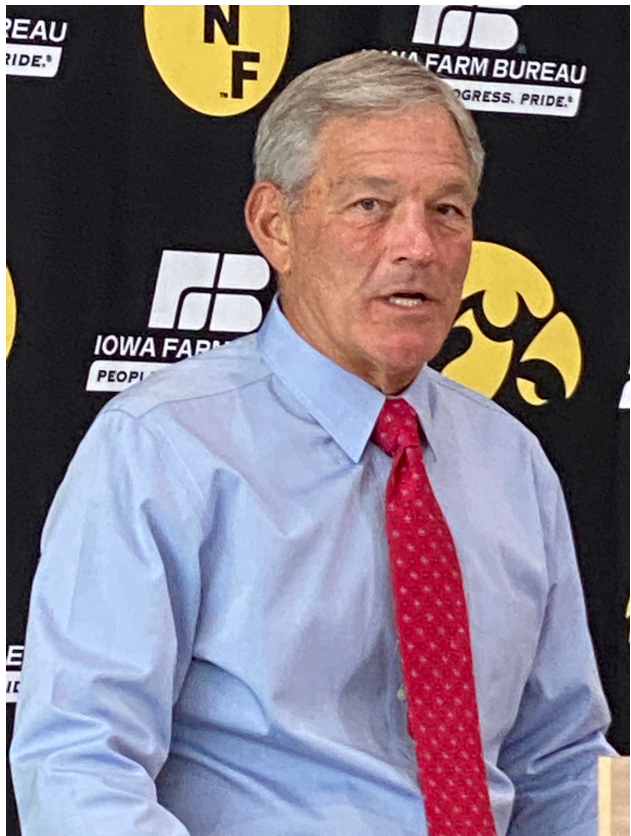


University of Iowa Football Media Conference
Tuesday, October 5, 2021
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Head Coach Kirk Ferentz
Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Just going in my office, I looked out and saw Old Blue down there. How many years you play in the NFL? If that truck wasn't out in the lot, he was either snowmobiling, fishing, out of town, otherwise he was down there training.

What a great benefit that has been for our program to have our athletes, current athletes, watch a guy like him, the way he worked, methodically and routinely throughout his pro career, to have the kind of success he had.

First and foremost, for Marshal to be honored this weekend is really special, so deserving. What a great list of awardees on that wall, too. You more than fit on any wall worth having. Great to see you, Marshal.

Good afternoon. Appreciate everybody being here. It was an unusual weekend

having Saturday off. We don't get that experience too often. It's kind of funny when you have a chance to step away for a little bit. It's almost like a week off in some ways. A good mental break, a chance for everybody to rest a little bit. Got back at it Sunday.

Just a quick look backwards. Happy to get the win as always. Any time you get a chance to get a victory, that's a good thing. Just thought going into the game there were a lot of challenges we talked about last week, being a Friday night game, short week. It was a late kickoff certainly. First and foremost, playing a good opponent.

Really proud of the way our guys handled the week. Thought we played with good energy, certainly good focus. Just after watching the tape, I thought both of our lines showed some growth on Friday night. Happy about that.

Some smart plays. Obviously a lot of takeaways out there. Maybe the biggest play in the game was the one that Sebastian Castro came up with. We got a score. Kicked off. He made a great play. Read the guy cutting back, knifed in there, made a great tackle, knocked the ball out. We come out with the ball, turn that into a score. That really was a big, big play.

The bigger story is a guy like Sebastian Castro who is not a household name, he's done a lot of good things in the program here for a couple years, a really good scout team player. I think as offensive coaches we thought he had a chance to be a good football player for us. Hoping now this is a start.

He's stacked behind some good players at his position, some veterans at the safety spot. But that kind of play hopefully can lead to better things for him in his career. Team-wise, that's what we need. We need big plays obviously from guys you haven't heard of, maybe some more good stories. Pleased about that, pleased for Sebastian. He's worked real hard.

Captains this week as we turn our eyes towards Penn State, Tyler Linderbaum , Matt Hankins, Jack Koerner, and Spencer Petras.

Medically, we're in pretty good shape relative to this time of year. Right now it looks like everybody the has a shot to be ready to go here. Tough challenge in front of us now. A lot of attention on this game, already is I'm sure.

That's what's in front of us right now. Really our message hasn't changed in five weeks. This is week six now. It's all about us trying to get better on a daily basis. That's about as simple as it is. That's what we need to be focused on besides trying to match up against a really good opponent.

We have a young football team. We're five games into it. We learned a lot about our guys. But there's always work to do. We certainly are in that mode right now.

I've been following Penn State since I was basically in elementary school, growing up in that part of the country. The story doesn't change a heck of a lot. A lot of things that were true when I was young are still true right now.

They have outstanding players. They've always had good players there. I can't remember a year where they didn't. Very well-coached. Coach Franklin really has them playing well right now, at a high rate. Last Saturday is good evidence of that.

Offensively, their quarterback is a veteran player, can make any throw that they ask him to make. Besides that, he's a dangerous runner. They'll run with him a little bit by design. As dangerous as anything, if it's not there for him, something opens up, he'll pull it down and go. He'll throw off the run or take it and make the yardage necessary for a first down or even more than that. That's where it all starts.

Again, he's a veteran player, a leader, a guy they look to. Big veteran group up front. They're a good group. They have two outstanding tight ends. Really good backs. They always do.

The receiver core is probably as good as I've seen. I'm as impressed with No. 5 as anybody we've seen this year. I say that with all due respect, we've played against some really good players so far, but he's outstanding.

Defensively, aggressive with their approach. High-pressure team. A lot of movement. Then most importantly they got good players and they play hard. They're giving up 12 points a game right now. That's going to be a challenge.

Special teams-wise, they're doing a great job there in all phases. Not a big surprise either.

Kid captain this week, Kale Schmidt. Kale is an outstanding young boy, beat cancer twice now. This fall five years from the last bout. That's certainly a positive thing. Happy for him. We're going to have a great environment Saturday, too. Certain of that. Be a great environment out there.

One thing we told our players, just like last week, the fans don't play the game. It's up to us to make sure we get ready. We're going to have to be our best at 3:05 Saturday for this game.

Q. Terry had his first interception of his career, so did Kaevon, where do you see those two going from here?

KIRK FERENTZ: We talked a lot about Terry this year, I think I have. To that point, that's where we're hoping Sebastian follows that path. Terry made his mark on special teams, has been playing at a high level on special teams, takes a lot of pride in it. Great to see him get his first interception, that's fun.

Kaevon, he's been a good special teams player to climb the ladder. Last year is really the first year we had enough faith and trust in him to see him as a starter. We've always seen him as a starter since he started last year.

A little different path. He was more of a basketball player in high school. Wasn't really recruited heavily in football. We just thought he had some potential as a football player. Really happy he's on our team.

Both guys are great guys. They work hard. Just really, really high-energy guys. That helps our football team. Good for them. That's something obviously every DB wants to do, get a pick or two. Good for them to have success in game action.

Q. I know there was only one Bob Sanders, but it does it take you back to see this guy from Erie flying around on special teams and wrecking mayhem?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, there's a parallel for sure. Both about the same height, too. Terry might have him by a quarter inch, something like that. A little different build.

But, yeah, Terry has been really good to us. Haven't had a lot of guys out here, but the ones we've had have been pretty good for us. Jovon Johnson is the one that put

us onto Terry. When Terry got here, he was skinny, small-ish kid. He's worked hard. The energy he plays with and the pride he takes in what he does has been impressive.

I think I said last week we consider him a starter at corner. Same as what I talked about a little earlier, a couple good players that are veteran guys, otherwise he would be starting for us. For him to get that action out there, have a chance to get a pick, that was great. He's been doing a great job on special teams for sure.

Q. Thirty-six years ago you were coaching offensive line in a game featuring one against two. Is there anything you can take away from that game?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the big takeaway from that game to today would be I tried to tell our guys yesterday, the energy, when you walk in the stadium, it's rare. When you get in an environment like that. Marshal has been in that environment in the NFL. There's certain games you can feel when you walk in the stadium, especially when the crowd gets in there. That part is really neat. You got to be prepared for that.

But, again, the fans aren't going to play the game. They're going to be to help us. The other takeaway, whether it's that game, every game counts, every game is really important. There are obviously certain games where it's a little bit more visibility. The more you can stay centered on what you're trying to accomplish...

That was the task last week. We didn't know what we were walking into. Three, four weeks back when he had to travel, same thing.

You better keep your eyes on the target. The target is all about what you're doing, your performance. The more you get wrapped up in the other stuff, the harder it is to be successful. That's the trick, trying to block all the other stuff out.

A week like this, people you haven't heard from in five years are calling about tickets. All that stuff. Nobody is mad about it, but that's just the way it goes. Deal with it. Ask Marshal about going to his Super Bowl, you hear from everybody in the world (smiling). Like you get 80 free tickets to the Super Bowl. That doesn't happen.

That's part of it. Let's play football.

Q. When you look at what Phil has been able to do at secondary coach, now as defensive coordinator, what is a distinguishing characteristic of how he's able to build players and elevate not only them as individuals but the unit and be successful?

KIRK FERENTZ: I apologize. I didn't read my notes clean enough. One thing I omitted, FOX is doing the game this week. I'll put a shameless plug in for Bob Stoops.

When Bob was playing for us, I used to look across the field, have a lot of respect for him. Michigan State. Played defense. Felt like Phil should have been one of the Stoops brothers. The way they played, thought he was their version of our Stoops family.

I had the good pleasure of knowing Bob as a person. I'm looking at Phil across the field, but you get to know Bob as a player, then a GA, then he ended up working on our staff.

There's a football gene to him. He grew up doing it. In a football family. I always kind of looked at Phil the same way, without knowing Phil. For whatever reason, you follow guys, respect what they do.

When it came time to hire a secondary coach here, first of all Norm endorsed Phil strongly, he was not a coaching vagabond, Michigan State, Toledo, now here 22 years plus. He's into coaching. Not into being a celebrity or all that kind of stuff.

He was a no star, two star, whatever. So was Bob. Neither one of those guys were big recruits. They really learned how to play and relied on that and became really good players as a result.

I describe him as a pure coach. He's a coach's coach. I think any good football player appreciates a coach who is genuine, authentic and truly tries to make the player better but cares about the player, too. I think Phil embodies all those traits.

Q. Back to '85, the Iowa-Michigan game. How do you remember Hayden?

KIRK FERENTZ: I really don't. He was pretty consistent most of the time. The one game he was gassed for was Texas obviously. We all knew, coaches and players all knew that was a big one for him. He handled it well. He just kept everything steady and tried to keep everybody where they should be.

It was a heck of a game obviously. But wasn't the end of the story. Like this one, this is the sixth game, awfully important to both teams. Life is going to go on afterwards. We all got to realize that.

We got a window, just like last week we had a shorter window. You want to maximize everything you can. There's no question, anybody who was in the stadium that night or day, late day, like this one, it feels different when you're in a game like that.

Q. How special is it for you when these games don't happen very often, to remember a game from 36 years ago?

KIRK FERENTZ: I tried to explain that. Penn State plays a lot more of these than we do probably, right? I haven't done the research. Yeah, it's what you want to play for. It's fun. It's fun when the chips are on the table. That's good.

But still about trying to beat your opponent. That's what it gets down to. It's a match. We all have the same amount of time. Who can do the best job of getting ready.

Q. You talked about being incredibly impressed with Jahan Dotson. What stands out to you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Everything. He's a really good athlete, which is great. I'm not going to say a lot of people are. There's a lot of really good athletes out there, but he's a football player, the way he does everything.

Let me just back up by saying I'm not an expert in the passing game or receiver play. Believe me, I did help out the receivers as a student coach at UConn, put that on my résumé, really important. A lot of help as freshmen.

Anyway, you just watch him play, there's no wasted movement. He's concise. Everything is really sharp. I have to think the pro guys watching him, have to like him. He's a really decisive player. He's a talented player, but he's a good football player. He plays hard.

That's the thing about them, they've got a lot of guys that are just really good players. I go back to the '02 game, looked like we were in good shape. Next thing you knew it's overtime. That's what you have to realize, you're playing a team that can close the gap really fast because they've got some guys. He's one of those guys. He's the guy, really good guy.

Q. Going back to Phil, the way the defense has been structured, how much input or decision making did you have in deciding to go with the cover scheme to avoid the big play rather than be really aggressive man defense?

KIRK FERENTZ: I actually said this in an interview on Saturday. When you talk about our defense, it starts with Norm. Talking about Coach Fry, one of the best people I've ever worked with in my life, best human being, Bill Brashier. Bill Brashier to this day, Bill and Norm, totally different backgrounds, right? Bill was all Texas, Norm was Hazel Park, Detroit. Totally different personalities yet similar. Really good people and really good coaches.

Long story short, when we were trying to decide, we interviewed three really good candidates, so to me it's all about -- the only thing I was opinionated on if we were going to play defense, other team had to block us. We better not give up big plays, then we better know how to tackle because you can't play defense if you do those three things, in my opinion. That was it.

Whether it was a 3-4, 4-3, man, all that stuff, it's about coverages. You just don't want to give up big plays a lot because it's not good. That's really what it was. Then it was more about the person. We struck gold with Norm. Just seemed like the natural progression. Phil has taken it and run with it.

Also he'd be the first to tell you it's a staff effort. We have a really good staff. Everybody has input, everybody's input counts, it's important. That's how we try to run this program, everybody has ownership. They're the experts. KB is the expert of the D-line, him and Jay, Seth with the linebackers, all that. See what they say, they're the guys coaching those players. They know their guys better than anybody.

Q. Penn State in your tenure has been so significant, 2004, 2002, 2008, 2009. Some good ones, bad ones. What stands out to you? Why is it always such a pivotal moment?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't answer it. That's just the way it is. The way it's been. The '83 game is one of my favorite games of my career as a coach, right? I don't have any as a player (smiling). That was a great game. Just an unbelievable football game. That was whatever it was, a track meet. You're playing an established program. If you talk about programs that you really don't need much explanation, Penn State is in that handful of national teams.

It's a challenge when you play them. The one thing for sure, just like I alluded to, going back a long ways, if you're not ready to play, it could be embarrassing so you better get ready to play.

Q. Your offense utilizes the tight end the same way Hayden did. Can I assume that is not a coincidence?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's definitely fair.

Q. When you got here the tight end was standing up.

KIRK FERENTZ: There's a reason why I'm doing it now. There's a reason why Coach Fry did that, and it just continued. It goes back to North Texas. The smart answer I always give is in the '80s, every time we lost and I went home, Mary would say you didn't throw the ball to the tight end enough. She was usually right. Kind of like the philosophy about defense.

All I know is I'm not very smart, but the smart defensive coaches I've been around, including in the NFL, if the other team had a good tight end, it seemed to really bother them, throw them out of kilter, out of whack. There's something about that if you have them in your arsenal. If you have a couple of them, it's even better. I think it just puts a little more pressure on a defensive team than not having one.

That's our personal belief, that's all.

Q. You say you're still not quite sure how good this team is that you've got here. Is this week the week where you feel like you might have a better sense of that, or every week a little bit more information?

KIRK FERENTZ: Every year is the same in one regard. This year, I went on record a lot of times since August, probably before that, we do have a young team. I go back to that show of hands first day of spring ball.

The good news there is there's more opportunity for growth. We've taken some steps certainly over five weeks. Some forwards, some backwards, too. That's part of the process.

You never know about your entire team really. I think about '02, maybe as good a season as we had. It really wasn't till late October when we really kind of hit stride. So that's part of it.

Every team is like that, not just us. You're always learning about your team. This thing could go a couple different ways Saturday. Whatever way it goes, we'll learn about our team, too, afterwards, whether it goes good, bad or indifferent. How do you handle that the next week? How do you keep moving forward?

That's why you play 12 games, then whatever's afterwards. I'm not making fun of it, but I'm always entertained by the chatter starting in January, too early Top 25 polls that come out two hours after the last bowl game or even during bowl season.

I get that. That's why fans go to games. I love that. Believe me, I appreciate that. As a coach, you can't get too caught up in that stuff because you just never know.

Give you a simple aside. So many things could change in the next five days, right, on the surface. You just never know.

Q. Penn State has found some help in the transfer portal. Do you see that happening and are you able to see that happen more and more, especially when teams have success?

KIRK FERENTZ: I really think it's a lot like the NIL stuff. I think it's going to be interesting to watch in the next couple years, the free transfers we have right now. Basically everybody gets a hall pass, basically some were getting them before, now everybody has got one. They get at least one Mulligan card in their pocket.

We've played against a lot of transfers over the last four or five weeks. We'll see more this year. For whatever reason it didn't work out that way for us that way this year. But Jack Heflin helped us. We shop at a little different store than maybe some other people. Look at Heflin, he's on the Packers' squad, right? He was a couple weeks ago. I hope he still is. What a great story, right? We got the right guy.

Anyway, it's going to happen I'm afraid, yep.

Q. One of those guys, VanValkenburg, what is his story, you don't pull guys like that out of D2 schools?

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't remember how his tape got here, how the whole thing came up. This is year three, right?

Like always, we didn't have enough depth, intrigued. It's kind of funny, Marshal's film, this is how smart of an evaluator I am. I looked at Marshal's film, at least we can redshirt this guy. I'm going back to when I was here in the '80s, all of our JC guys sat and played as fifth-year guys. Next thing you know they're in the NFL.

We're going to at least redshirt them. He seemed like a tough guy on film. I don't know how good a player he was. Expert evaluation, right?

After about three days in practice that spring, I was like, this guy is our best lineman right now. Took that long to figure it out.

The one thing about Zach, he just played hard. Level of competition, all that stuff. He played hard every film you watched. That's really the guy he is now. I referenced this, basically his role is to give A.J. 10 plays off, 12 plays off a game. He was just a guy out there running plays. The other guy put his hand up, couldn't go anywhere. Last year he played really well. He's playing really well right now. Besides that he's a leader for us in a very young group of guys.

The value of that, too, what they bring besides their plan, Marshal is the same way. Good football player, yeah, but there's a reason the Ravens basically made him their franchise player. They weren't going to let him leave that building because they understood what he did to the locker room. There's so much value in that, besides running 40 yard dashes, all that other stuff.

Q. Turnover to points ratio has been a really big part of the team's success. How would you assess the offense's ability to operate efficiently on a short field?

KIRK FERENTZ: That was a highlight the other night. We were getting the turnover and there were points. That's a good football team, what good football teams learn how to do. Getting the stop is great, getting the ball back. If you don't show something for it.

That's why I reference that one sequence, that pretty much took the heart out of their football team. That bang, bang, demoralizing. Get two scores before they even snap the ball. That's a really good deal.

Kind of the same discussion as getting in the red zone. You want to come out with touchdowns if you can. Any points are better than no points, but you want to get touchdowns. Those are all good things. Opportunistic teams learn how to do that.

Q. How helpful has it been to have the depth in the secondary, six interceptions from six different players?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I joke about it. It's not like we have a drill for this stuff. If we did, we should do it more.

I think that's experience. But it's also a team effort. All the guys will tell you, the guys on the back end would tell you. That's where stats come up a lot. I made a point in letting our guys know by record we didn't have a sack the other night. We were making the quarterback uncomfortable. There's value in that, too. If you can get the guy moving where he's not comfortable, throw the ball, that stuff doesn't show in the stat column. That's the beauty of a guy like VanValkenburg when they're working up front.

Q. In '16, redshirt T.J. Hockenson. That was before the four game Mulligan rule, whatever. How much has that changed you because he left after three years? Are you now more willing to push those true freshmen into the lineup because they're not going to be here for five years?

KIRK FERENTZ: I've definitely jumped into that school of thought. I'd just assume players that are playing are going to leave after three. Matt Hankins is a great example of a guy who didn't, right? He chose to come back this year. Had he left, that wouldn't have been totally surprising to me. I think it also shows some wisdom on his part, some maturity. It is the best thing for him if he does want to continue to play.

Common sense would tell you that there's a risk/reward in everything you do. Common sense would say that's the best way to go. Tom Brady, but there aren't many 38-year-old players in the NFL. If you can make yourself more NFL-ready, there's a lot of upside to that.

Also the world we live in right now, kind of like the transfers, all that, that's just not the way people think anymore. You have to change your thinking with what's going on.

If you benefit from a guy staying another year like Matt did, that's great, awesome. He's staying because he wanted to stay, not because we've locked him into it.

Q. Sam LaPorta, you threw him out there kind of by necessity. Didn't seem like he was ready, but he played hard. How has his growth been? Do you think that true freshman year helped him?

KIRK FERENTZ: It does. There's two sides to every coin. If I was the commissioner of sports, which I will never be, commissioner of football, no freshman would ever play, period. It's the best thing for them. Let them go to school, get de-recruited, all the nonsense everybody talks about. Uncle Jim is not calling him and asking why you're not playing 48 snaps instead of 21? All the things that are unfair to the kid, the player that happen in this real world.

The best thing for them all would be just to sit. This is going to kill our recruiting for the next 15 years, right?

Fortunately I have no say in that, so I'll flip it over. Can't beat 'em, join 'em. That's the world that I think is perfect, but it's not going to happen. Nobody cares what I think.

The reality is, when we look at guys right now, just play them if they can play. You can do some mental damage to guys by playing them before they're ready. That's not fair. That's not good. It's not healthy. You want guys to play, let them go if that's the best thing for them. In Sam's case, it was.

Q. Do you preach to your guys about opportunity, just enjoying the experience?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes. The game we're referencing from 50 years ago, I'll remember that as long as I live just because of the environment that day. Not everybody gets that chance. We didn't play in those games at UConn or Maine. I can tell you that.

Football is still important. What the essence of football is. Yes, these are neat experiences. We just happen to be the guest at the party this year. We get to play Penn State, and that's good.

Q. Some of the guys were saying on Saturday, they were texting their families, it's going to be a huge game. What advice have you given these guys on everything that comes with this?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, I think you know how I feel about rankings in October and September. We just happen to be 5-0 right now, so do they. That's the way it is.

Those things will be a lot more valid four, five, six weeks from now. I hope we are in that discussion, but we have to earn that. That's really what the key thing is. It's not a five-week season or six-week season. You don't get any prizes. Nobody is going to announce a bowl matchup next week. They do the prognostications every week, I get that. They don't really count those. They are paper money, Monopoly money. Nothing really counts until you get to the finish line.

These are two good teams. No debating that. We're both good teams. Enjoy that part. But we have a lot of football ahead of us right now. This is a really important game because first of all it's the next one up. That makes it the most important game.

But all you can do is give it our best. What we got to do is make sure we don't leave the door open this week because we're answering those texts, trying to get Johnny Smith tickets, all that stuff. We have to stay in our routine and practice and do the work you have to do.

Q. Obviously the focus is on one thing. Is there something personally for you that you're really proud of this team so far?

KIRK FERENTZ: Oh, yeah. I can't remember many teams I haven't been proud of. But I have the luxury, the thing about being a coach, we watch the guys since January 25th, watch them every phase, how they do things, how they grow together.

I think I went on record in April, it's hard to come out of spring ball, you really don't have an identity yet. You've done some things, but you haven't done a lot. We've done a lot more things now since that time. We've been in some tough situations together.

But the one thing, whether you want to talk about the '80s, nine years here, my 23-plus years, we've had quality guys here. That's the part. I've never coached at a service academy. You talk to those people, they just talk about the caliber of individuals you work with. I've always felt that way about this place.

I don't know a lot. Four years at UConn, five years at UConn, one year at Pitt, two years at Worcester Academy, six years in the NFL. We talk about Bob Stoops in the '80s, Marshal 15 years ago. We've been really lucky this way. This group fits in that bill.

Q. When you talk to Sam, he recognizes the legacy of his position group here, the successful players that came before him. He wants to make sure to do everything can he to extend that legacy. In what ways maybe has he? I'm not measuring him against any of the other guys, but is he getting to the point where he is leaving the jersey in a better place?

KIRK FERENTZ: From the day he walked in here, he's really been fun to coach. You visit with him, you just feel it, right? He likes life. He likes people. He's the same way as a football player. When he's on the practice field, in the weight room or just around the building, he's upbeat, really enjoys his teammates, enjoys the game, likes the competition. May have referenced here somewhere during a break. We called down there, they were having a family volleyball tournament. That's the kind of family they are.

That's the neat thing about football, too, everybody has different personalities, they're not all the same yet. What they do as players kind of defines them as football players. He's done a really good job obviously, is a really good football player. We're thrilled he's on the team. We've had a long line of guys that were really good players here.

Q. Luke Lachey has gained about 40 pounds since he got here. How has his development grown? The block that he made jolted a few of his teammates in a positive way.

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm just laughing a little bit. He's kind of the young guy. But he's grown immensely since he's been here. He's done a lot of good things. On one hand sometimes you think he's like 15 years old when you talk to him. I'm going back a year. Kind of young as a player.

One thing he's done consistently since he's been here, he makes tough catches in practice all the time. He'll make a catch, gets nailed by a DB. No drama, just gets up like it's part of his job. It is part of his job. Not everybody understands that. Even when he was a lot less weight, year and a half younger, that stood out.

When you see those things, Castro the same way. We've been watching Castro on our scout team, the last two years, blow guys up and stuff. When are we going to see that somewhere else? That's the fun of it, when you see those little glimpses, you see guys have success on the game field.