

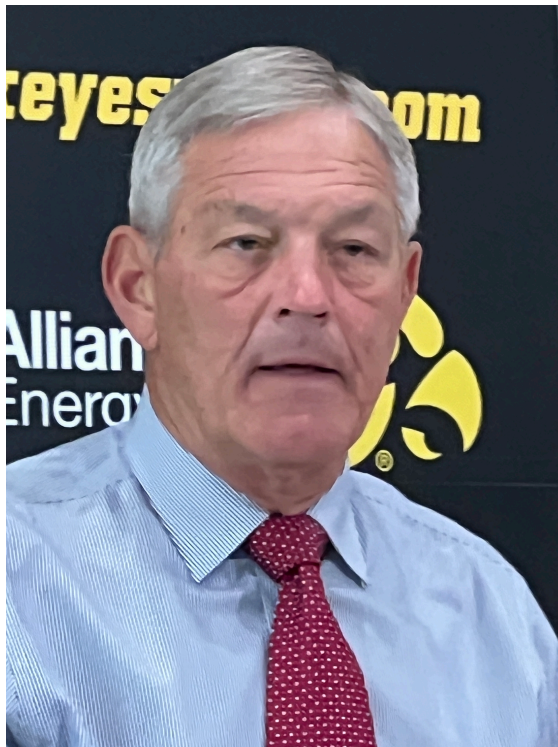
UNIVERSITY OF IOWA FOOTBALL MEDIA CONFERENCE

October 31, 2023

Head Coach Kirk Ferentz

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon, everybody. Appreciate you being here.

First of all, going back a little bit, coming off a bye week right now, and that's sometimes a good thing, sometimes a bad thing. This time of year it really was helpful for us. We're a little bit banged up physically. It gave us a chance to rest our players that have been playing pretty extensively, give them a mental break also, cut back a lot on what they did and then also move some of the younger guys forward. It's always a good opportunity for the team to move forward. Hopefully that's what we got accomplished last week.

We're back into a game week mode and right now our focus is on getting ready for the game in Chicago.

Captains this week are Joe Evans, Jay Higgins,

Luke Lachey and Logan Lee.

Injury-wise, T.J. Hall is still out, but fairly realistic to say everybody else will have a chance to play and a little bit healthier than they were last time we were on the field. Certainly a good thing.

Northwestern looks to be a team that's really playing well, playing with confidence, playing with energy, and showing improvement week to week.

I think their head coach's comments reflected that yesterday with his press conference, and I would verify that, just having a chance to watch them right now, They're gaining momentum and playing with confidence. They have a new quarterback, who's played the last three games. Seemed like a catalyst for them Saturday, doing a nice job out there.

Basically two things that really stand out to me, if you look at last week's game against Maryland. They had a seven-point lead. Maryland took the ball down to the 1 yard line, had three shots from the 1. Northwestern got three stops, which is pretty impressive

and difficult to do. More impressively, Northwestern took the ball and drove it, whatever it was, 77 yards and got a field goal out of it.

Basically went from Maryland had a chance to tie it up, and next thing you know Northwestern has a 10-point lead and took control of the game from that point. That says a lot about them.

If you go back to the Minnesota game earlier, the fact they were down significantly, came back and scored 21 points in that fourth quarter and won in overtime, tells you a lot of people are doing a lot of things well up there, and their players are responding.

That being said, we look at this as another tough Big Ten road game, expect it to be competitive and really tight. I'm guessing both teams are looking at it that way as we go into it.

Kid captain this week is Lincoln Veach, a young guy from Maquoketa. Lincoln was diagnosed with leukemia at age 4. It was complicated by a life threatening infection during his treatment time. Spent around 100 days over in the Stead Family Hospital. Pretty tough road there -- ten surgeries, chemotherapy, still on chemotherapy. Advancing and getting better. He's a kindergartner right now. Amazingly tough guy. We'll be thinking about him and his family this week when we travel over to Chicago.

A couple things on the announcement yesterday, I'll briefly address the announcement that came out of the AD's office, and I suspect you'll probably have questions. We'll take a few of those afterwards.

I'll basically say this, for 25 years, I've tried to operate with the singular focus of doing what I feel is best for the program and that's mainly the players and everybody that works in this building. That's my first obligation.

Basically, my philosophy and my practice has been pretty consistent. Typically we go through the season and then run an evaluation of the program top to bottom afterwards. Yesterday's announcement is certainly a departure from that practice, but that's really what we've tried to do for the past 24 years.

Final analysis, just let's say this. I'm really proud of our players, proud of our coaches. They've done a good job over a long time. What we do now is move forward, and our focus is on getting ready for this game and then, bigger picture, all four games.

Decisions made on Saturdays, player-wise, are based on us watching the guys during the out of season, in season, a lot of hours of evaluation time we spend with them just in classrooms, all those types of things.

Just really proud of our players. I think they've done a great job. Our staff's done a great job. You have challenges that sometimes you can't foresee, and this season is one of those. You play through it. You work through it, and that's our plan moving forward. I am very proud of the program, the success that we've had, and this is one of those things we'll have to work through as well.

As you know, I did request to be the public voice this week. I thought it was best to protect our players a little bit, pull them out of the interview list. You'll get a chance to talk to them Saturday certainly and beyond that.

I think in light of what's going on right now, I think it's best for us to stay tight and keep our focus on the game at hand. That is the most important thing, and that's what we owe to our 120-plus players. That's really where our focus has been. Our plan is to move forward here and do our best to finish out this portion of the season strong, four-week season.

We have an opportunity to do some really good things right now. I think we're all excited about that. Historically, this program has had ten 10-win seasons in 100 and whatever years. We have an opportunity for that and potentially beyond that too, which would be historic.

It's like any game. Our focus is on doing what we can do this week. That's the only one that counts. What we can do this week to be successful, and that's where our focus is. Again, I would just ask you to appreciate that. Plenty of other time for discussion after the season if we want to go back and go through all the detail, minutia, all that stuff.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. When were you notified by Beth Goetz regarding this decision? What were the consultations like, and then the announcement when you were made aware of it?

KIRK FERENTZ: I had access to the announcement that you read, that we all read over the weekend.

Q. In light of things that have transpired, are you definitively returning yourself next season, or is that still up in the air?

KIRK FERENTZ: Things are as they always are, to worry about this game and bigger scale, bigger picture for these four games. That's where my focus has been this entire season. Obviously there was more than four games a week ago, two weeks ago. That's what I think about.

Each and every year it's been pretty consistent, just like the other things I referenced.

Q. Given the timing and stepping away from your typical practice, Beth's still on an interim tag, is this going to impact your relationship going forward with Beth and just how do you kind of balance out the decision that's made but also moving forward?

KIRK FERENTZ: The only forward I'm thinking about right now is now till Saturday. It's been that way each and every week of my career. That's how you operate when you're in season.

There's a chain of command in everything we do. Coach Hayden Fry would frequently remind us, some of the younger guys -- I think he was referring to myself and Dan McCartney. Could have used some time in the military to learn the chain of command. I

know he threw the insubordination term around, but hopefully I was never guilty of that with him or anyone else.

There's a chain of command to everything, and I respect that, and we move forward.

Q. Listening to your statement, it sounded like is your frustration with the timing that it happened before the end of the season or with the decision itself or both?

KIRK FERENTZ: I would just say my policy has typically been to evaluate everything -- players, coaches, all that -- postseason because in season we have a lot on our plates. That's kind of been the nature of it, and it's been that way probably since I got started full-time in '81. There's not enough time in the day. That's where our focus is.

Everything you do is precious in terms of time relations. So to me, it's a better time. It's a less emotional time. I can give you a lot of reasons why I've done it that way, but it really doesn't matter. It's really not significant right now because we're dealing with something that we have to deal with, and we will.

That's one of the points I always make for our team in camp, at the end of camp. There are a lot of factors it usually boils down to, usually three or four of them, but one that never changes is how do you handle the bumps you don't anticipate, the things you don't see coming, certainly don't see coming in August and early September? It's part of any season, just like injuries. Those are parts of seasons, and how you respond to those things, that's how you get defined.

So this is just one more of those things that you have to try to compartmentalize and put it in the right position. Then the most important question is what do we have to do to move forward and be successful to be successful?

Q. Assuming you're still here 2024, what would be the timeline for finding Brian's replacement, and how much latitude would the next offensive coordinator have to make changes?

KIRK FERENTZ: Let's kind of go back here. Really what I'm worried about right now are the next four weeks. I think anything beyond that is getting way ahead. That would be an injustice to our football team to be thinking about any of those things that you mentioned.

That's my first loyalty is to the football team. Things are in your control, which I think this is. You do what you can do that will give us our best chance to be successful knowing that all four of these games are going to be challenging. That's not going to change. I'd be foolish to be giving thoughts to things that are outside the realm of that.

Q. Now that you can step back and look, is there anything that you sort of regret about the plan that Brian was put on the 25 points per game and all of these goals?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not good at that looking back picture because it really doesn't serve much purpose. I think, when all that took place, Brian is the one who signed it, and I

think he thought it was the best option available, and I would have co-signed it. Not that it was my business.

As I said earlier, there's been a lot of unusual things this year that I think have affected our play. If you want to look back at recent history, look at 2009, I think you can figure that one out. The course of our season changed very dramatically.

I'll go back and one-up you, 1984, and coincidentally is the first weekend of November. We had a couple bumps there. We were sitting direct path to the Rose Bowl, had a couple injuries, and things changed really fast. That happens in football. You have to deal with it, and you can't worry about the 8 million things that might happen here in the next two weeks. Now you're talking about a waste of time. That's a waste of time too.

Q. I wanted to ask you about this on a personal level. How does this affect you in that regard? Because obviously you and Brian have a different relationship.

KIRK FERENTZ: Obviously we have a biological relationship. I'm very fond of him. I've had a lot of relationships with people that have worked here, and that's one of the things we do. If it was anybody on this staff that fell in this category, I'd feel bad about it. I'm guessing they would encourage us to keep moving forward too. It's what you have to do.

Q. What were your emotions like when you found out?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, again, that really is not pertinent to the topic either. To kind of follow up with what Scott just asked, we're all not best friends, it's like a team, you have 120 guys. We're not all each other's best friends. But we have a mutual respect for one another and we share common goals.

That's one of the beauties of this sport. One of the beauties of this sport is the far-reaching numbers. We have 120-plus guys on our football team. To get guys to become close and develop chemistry and all those things, that's the beauty of the game.

My 34 years here, we've had tremendous stability. Unusual. I don't want to call it rare, but it probably is rare. That's a fair word. I haven't done a study on it. But we've had pretty good stability overall for my 34 years here. That's one of the real perks of it all. Any time anybody goes through a setback, you always feel bad. It's just like losing a game. You feel bad about that too, but you move on.

Q. Looking back this past year with you and your son, anything you would have done differently maybe to change the way things have panned out?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, kept everybody healthy. Again, you can't play that game. It is what it is. We're at where we're at, and we're moving forward. That's all you can do.

Q. How much thought, if any, was given to quarterback switch during the bye week? Is Deacon still your guy? Is Joe Labas still your No. 2 guy going into this game?

KIRK FERENTZ: We've looked at every position and let everybody compete and let everybody practice. Again, the older guys are more experienced. I think they got some work last week, but not to the extent of a normal practice week, I would say.

The quarterback position, it's a clear 1, 2, 3, and we'll keep an open mind as we move forward.

Q. Labas is 2 then?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes.

Q. With regards to the next four games, do you see any change in the play calling at all considering the circumstances with the offensive coordinator?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really it's more based on who the players are and what they can do. That is changing. It changed dramatically already this year. So you try to bend and yield, move in a direction where the players that are going to be playing, the guys that are in the game can do some things. Yeah, that's a possibility. Depends who's in the game. We'll do what we think is best.

First and foremost, if you want to start with something that's really important, start with better ball security. That would be a major thing. It's really hard to win football games at this level thinking you can turn it over three times and your opponent doesn't. That's pretty much a foregone conclusion how the game's going to go.

So there's a lot of things we need to do better right now, but if we're going to excel -- Stanzi's the only guy who can break this rule -- we've got to take care of the football. We've got to take care of that, and we'll go from there.

We do have some strengths on our team right now. You try to play to your strengths as well. That's 25 years of that too.

Q. Any thoughts on playing at Wrigley Field? Are you a baseball fan by any chance? Any thoughts on that?

KIRK FERENTZ: My first response to that is I think baseball is for baseball. I love baseball, and I'm a little, not upset, but disappointed I haven't gotten to see much this year. Not that we get to see much ever because we're usually working.

I've only had one experience playing in a baseball stadium, and that was unique. We got first-class treatment, but the field was not great. There's some challenges with this. This will be the first time in my career. I remember watching -- I'm old enough to watch Bud Grant and the Vikings in the old Metropolitan Stadium. It was probably black and white TV, but they were both on the same sideline. It was about 12 degrees.

Playing on the same sideline is a unique challenge. Baseball locker room, single file, up and down steps, all things like that when you have 70 guys you're trying to get through. There will be some challenges -- signal stealing, subbing from one end of the field to the other.

We had a little conference call yesterday, and I teased Ron Snodgrass, who's an outstanding official and a really good person. I thought he must have pissed somebody off to get this game. Trying to manage the clock in this situation is going to be a real challenge. It's like anything else. We're going to make it go. It will be a thrill.

Q. Looking ahead with this game this weekend and the next four weeks, how do you keep the current circumstances from being a distraction?

KIRK FERENTZ: You just move on and block it out. It's like anything else that could be a distraction. If you let it be one, it could be.

We're all adults. Norm Parker used to say it all the time. Boys do what they want to do and men do what they have to do. Not in a sexist way. Adults do what they have to do. We work with a young population, so there's some relevance to that.

That's one of the challenges, learning how to focus on what you have to focus on. I can tell you this. As competitive as this conference is, if we allow that to be a distraction, just like injuries, then chances are we're going to minus our chances for success. It's tough already. This is a tough conference to win in. I can tell you that from experience.

Every little thing that you might give up is significant. Why would you do that? Why would you surrender that? That's in our power. That's in our control, if we let it be that way.

Q. Kirk, you mentioned sign stealing. How prevalent is that in the Big Ten? You guys played Michigan. Did you feel that was going on?

KIRK FERENTZ: No, I don't -- I've never put much stock in that. I'm sure it goes on. It does in baseball, I know. There are things that we can do, and I think are being discussed to better serve ourselves, to protect ourselves from ourselves.

Coaches have always been competitive. I won't identify the place. It was not here. But one time in my career, I sat in a room and heard that we knew, whatever, 95 percent of the calls on the other team. It just so happens the quarterback we were playing that day was not -- he's not in the record books for performance at that level, but he did set a stadium passing record that day.

My personal feeling is sometimes you get so fixated and caught up in that stuff, you forget about playing. Maybe I'm naive, but that's kind of the way we've operated for a long time, at least the way I operate.

It's not new. No, it's not new.

Q. When you and Brian had the meeting -- first of all, I'm sorry I'm reverting back, but I didn't get a chance to ask in the earlier portion of this. When you and Brian and Beth and President Wilson met, what did they tell you about why now as opposed to waiting until season's end?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know what's been disclosed about who met, but what I just heard is not 100 percent accurate. Again, the details that are private and who conferred with each other, that's private as well. Other than what's been released.

Again, it really doesn't matter at this point. The decision has been made. It's the university's position. We're moving forward. We have four games. What I'm looking at, Mike, we're a 6-2 football team right now. It's not great. It's not perfect, but it's not bad. We do have an opportunity to win 10. Again, just like I said a minute ago, it's going to be extremely difficult, but we have an opportunity.

I always tend to look at what's the upside on things. Right now that's our goal to win those four games that remain just like I'm sure everybody else on our schedule is trying to do. If we get to win 11, we'll try to win 11. If we get a shot at 12, we'll go for that, too. If we go beyond that, that would be great.

That's probably about as good as we can do, which would be okay. That's really all that matters at this point.

Q. Wanted to ask you about offense, specifically negative plays aside. What can you do better positively to put your team in a position to score more points, to move the ball a little bit better than what we've seen the last few weeks?

KIRK FERENTZ: First things first, ball security. Let's go right back there because that really impacted the game pretty significantly last time we were out there. Again, I think it was 3-0, wasn't it? I don't think they gave one up. If you're down 3-0, it's going to be tough. It's tough to outscore people getting in those types of games. You're going to be sloppy with the football.

Yeah, those are things we've been working on, believe it or not, since August, and I thought we were on the right path. We've had some things altered this season, so we've got to work through those. There's no magic panacea. Avoiding negative yardage plays, to your point, would be a real starting point to get ahead in the chains. That would be a real benefit as well.

So little things like that, and then someplace along the way you have to make some big plays. That's just how offense works typically. Starts with minimizing your mistakes, ball security being the first and foremost one. Secondly, not having negative yardage plays. I'm not a big sack guy, but if you take a sack or get negative yards, get thrown off, the chances not only of getting a first down, but more importantly scoring, are really minimized in the NFL to a dramatic number.

If you get a sack, you might as well punt and try to get the ball back. Not that you would, but you understand the point.

Then at some point good football teams find ways to make plays. You design one every now and then, but it's usually somebody making a really good play and then doing a little something extra.

Q. There's a metric out there that Deacon Hill is 160th out of 160 in turnover worthy plays -- interceptions, fumbles, balls tipped. How do you equate him still being QB1 with such a high turnover possibility when he's in the game? Or are the other guys just that bad?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, those are your words, not mine certainly. It isn't that bad. They're playing major college football.

Again, we go through. We've been evaluating since the start of spring practice. You look at the body of work. Believe it or not, at least I think we know a little bit more about our guys because we see a lot more. Our judgment is 100 percent correct rarely, when you talk about player evaluation, that type of thing. But all you can do is try to make the best decisions based on what the evidence is and what you see on a daily basis and then move forward.

By you saying somebody else might be bad is suggesting the other guy is bad, too. I don't look at it that way. I try to look at guys who haven't been able to grow very much and see how well they can move forward and how quickly they can move forward here.

I'll go back to the first point, and to your point, if we're going to beat ourselves, it's going to be tough to win. So far we've lost two games this year. We've had experience of losing. 25 years, I've got plenty of experience with losing. I'm an expert at getting my butt kicked. That's one thing that I'm an expert in. But you get back on your feet and move forward.

Q. This is kind of coming from a different aspect of things, but Tory has obviously gotten a lot of attention for what he's done.

KIRK FERENTZ: Rightfully so, yeah.

Q. But Drew Stevens has also been really valuable. How did you originally kind of find him, and how did he get on your radar?

KIRK FERENTZ: I believe the origin -- Duncan is from out there, Keith Duncan grew up in that area. Kicking guys have a network. There's an Australian one, a placekicker one. They have a little network and all that kind of stuff. So that was the connection there.

I remember distinctly meeting with he and his dad out here thinking, boy, am I wasting my time today, shaking hands and visiting a little bit. Let me get this straight. He's from South Carolina. He's going to come to Iowa as a walk-on. Why would that make sense? He looked like he was 12 at that time.

Little did I know that however many years, three, four years later, this is what it would look like. He's done a great job. I've said this before. Publicly, nobody had a worse spring. He came early, left high school early, and he was God awful out there. I'm pretty sure his dad, it was Easter day. I remember it was Easter day. I remember pulling in here, getting out of my car, and some guy jumps out of a car over there. I'm thinking, is this guy a stalker or what?

It was his dad trying to get in because Drew was having a rough time. He flew in, wanted to spend some time with him one-on-one. I took him in the building, and Drew was kicking actually in the indoor.

These are the stories behind, again, you guys don't get access to. Anybody that's usually successful has somebody supporting them in a healthy way, hopefully in a right way. It's like most good players. The hard work is done by the individual, and that's what Drew has done.

He changed his body physically. He's obviously matured. Again, he was like 15 when he got here. He was a young guy, early graduate. He's done a lot of good things.

Then I'll transition it. I was teasing Tory out there this morning, and it was a little brisk, a little windy. He was booming the ball. I said, four years ago, there's no way you could have done this. He just joked and said, I never punted an American football until four years ago. Tory is an outstanding player, an outstanding player having a great season. He has worked extremely hard for it, and that's usually the story behind the story.

I'll go back to the quarterbacks. None of them are really experienced right now. There's no free agents we can go out and grab right now. Fitzpatrick is, I think, done. I saw him on TV, right? That would have added to his repertoire of teams. But that's not available. We've got to work with the guys we have and try to get them better. It's that way at each position, each and every position.

One thing I can assure you, I don't think there's a lot of guys that are out there playing that really don't care. These guys care. They care about each other. They work hard. Are they perfect all the time? Do they live up to everybody's expectations? No, that's not realistic.

But these guys work hard, and they've all got stories, just like the ones I mentioned there.

Q. You mentioned that Deacon Hill is a younger quarterback. Obviously got pressed into action. Do you think that he is in position to succeed with everything that's around him, or are these struggles to be expected?

KIRK FERENTZ: Famous words. We'll see. All right? Not to kill the talk season, but the offseason, everybody's speculating. Nobody's talking about the Jets right now in the Super Bowl. They were all summer. But we'll see.

I don't know the answers. I think he's got a lot of really good qualities. Go back to his history, playing on a wildcat team, he and I were talking about it yesterday. His buddy was in here from Valparaiso, who's a receiver. He played and lived in Deacon's house for whatever, like four, six weeks, I don't know. Somehow it must have beat the COVID, they didn't arrest him for being a COVID violator in California.

He lived in Deacon's house, played on that wildcat team they had during COVID because nobody was really playing COVID sanctioned football back then. His senior year was

disrupted. Obviously didn't play at his last school. This is all new for him. I'm not going to ask people to be patient, but I think it's realistic that it may take him some time to get going.

We as coaches have seen plenty to be encouraged about and plenty that we feel good about. If he's persistent and he keeps working hard, some better days are ahead for him. He's already done some good things. We'll try to build off of that just like we would with every player on our team.

Q. What stands out to you about Sebastian Castro?

KIRK FERENTZ: His growth. Talking about guys who have grown, and Sebastian probably wasn't ready for primetime a couple years ago. Played on special teams. Some of our guys on special teams right now will end up being really good players.

Again, the common denominator. He's done the hard work. He's paid his dues. He's been out there every day. He's a tough minded guy. He loves the sport, loves his teammates.

Probably the biggest challenge right now, besides trying to keep their quarterback contained, second biggest challenge will be getting his ticket order filled because he and Leshon are going back home. It's never fun going back home because everybody in the world wants a ticket. They were all your best friend four years ago. But I think he has it under control.

Q. Where would you evaluate the offensive line at this point with these last four games to go? And how much of a part has Rusty Feth played in that group?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'll fall back. I think they're improving. We do our full evaluations at the end of the year. Rusty has been a great addition. You hear all the negatives about NIL, and there's plenty of them. But I look at some of the guys that have come in here and done a great job. He's been a stabilizer. He's a veteran guy.

Talking about the quarterback, during the season, you can't get that. I think he's really -- he's just a mature kid that loves football. He's meshed extremely well and extremely quickly with his teammates. I say the same thing about Nick Jackson and two guys that got here in June. That was a little concern. Rather have them here in the spring. But they got here in June.

It's proof, if you get the right guys -- Mekhi Sargent, thinking about guys in the past that have done well and done well that next year they showed up that got here late also.

Nothing's impossible. There's always value out there if you find the right people. He's done a really nice job.