

**University of Iowa Football Media Conference
Tuesday, November 1, 2022
Iowa City, Iowa, USA
Head Coach Kirk Ferentz
Press Conference**



COACH FERENTZ: Moving forward, starting with this weekend, you have to be in the game 60 minutes, ready to go mentally that way.

Moving on to Purdue. Great respect for Coach Brohm, his players. Done a great job since he's gotten there. Not just a matter of them being good offensively, which they are, but they've upgraded their program in all three areas. They play well defensively, on special teams, on offense as well.

We haven't had much success the last couple outings against them, so that's a goal of ours, to try to change that. Big challenge on our hands. They're coming off a bye, so they should be well-rested and prepared. I'm sure they will be. We're going on the road. A road challenge for us.

Again, we took a big step forward last week. The idea now is to keep pushing

forward and see what we can do. Certainly need to do that to be successful this week.

Captains this week, same four guys: Jack Campbell, Sam LaPorta, Kaevon Merriwether and Riley Moss in alphabetical order.

Injuries, nothing really new to report. A couple guys banged up. Hopefully they'll be ready to roll by the end of the week. Like any time this year, you're going to have some guys out.

A couple congratulations to extend. Drew Stevens being Big Ten Freshman of the Week. Good to hear that.

Jack Campbell, almost old news now, six days later being in the finals for the Campbell Award, Campbell Trophy, and a National Football Foundation Award winner. A very prestigious thing. The Campbell Trophy is about character,

leadership, academic accomplishment. Jack embodies all those things on top of being a great football player. Very nice and worthy honor for him.

Last but not least, this week's Kid Captain, Carver Meiners is an eight-year-old from Polk City. Had open heart surgery the first week of his life. Doing really well. Active in sports, active in school. I'm told he and his family did a book drive for the Family Children's Hospital this past winter, collected 400 books for the hospital. Just a great young guy. We'll be thinking about him certainly over the weekend.

Looking forward to this challenge and hopefully we'll see improvement with our team this week, keep pushing forward. I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. To clarify, I'm assuming that means no Roberts, Dunker, Keagan?

KIRK FERENTZ: Dunker might have a chance. Supposed to get back on the field tomorrow. We'll see. The other guys, I don't foresee that coming right now.

Q. Do you have any hamstring issues that have ever approached what Keagan Johnson's dealt with?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's had a series of injuries. It's not just one thing. Most recently it's been the hamstring.

I'm thinking about Ohio State's No. 11 played against us. I don't know why I heard this or read this, but somewhere after last week's game he reinjured his. I think he's played in three games. Hamstrings are just funny. A lot of bad injuries to have; that might be the worst as far as I can tell. They can be really frustrating.

Q. The second straight year you're facing Purdue coming off a bye. A program that gives you guys some fits of sorts. Does that add to the curiosity of what might be going on behind closed doors?

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, I wasn't even aware of that. I'm aware of their players on the field, more worried about them.

Yeah, there's always quirks in our schedule. We're not the only ones that experience that. I think some are pretty public about that... thought I heard a couple weeks ago. I don't read the papers very much, but I did hear that, little chatter.

There's nothing to do about it. I don't know how impactful it is. Bye weeks, I was asking one of the younger guys earlier in the week the best time for a bye week. Never quite sure. Sometimes if you're just banged up, really banged up, it's a good thing.

You go back to 2002, probably best thing in the world we didn't have one till the end of the season because we really had good momentum. Sometimes they can be a bad thing, too.

These guys have been playing well. I expect they'll play well Saturday. We're not thinking much about that.

Q. Aidan O'Connell strikes me as a different kind of quarterback. What stands out about his game?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's an outstanding passer, he's experienced. He's a six-year player. He's had great success against really good competition. Probably get more exposure in the summertime. Listening to a guy who does a talk show on Saturday mornings going to get a cup of coffee. This particular gentleman was leading the Heisman campaign for him. Threw his stats out. Awfully impressive. We saw firsthand what he can do.

Combination of Coach Brohm's offensive mind. Everywhere he's been, they've been good offensively, scored points. I don't want to say he's the best passer in the conference, but he's certainly in the top echelon. We played a pretty good guy a couple weeks ago. He's certainly in that stratosphere, if you will.

Q. You've taken a few players from the transfer portal. Also lost a pretty good quarterback to the transfer portal six or seven years ago. Were you surprised when one of your receivers, especially when Charlie left as late as he did, and what's been the impact he's had at Purdue since he's left?

KIRK FERENTZ: Obviously you look at the stats. He's playing well. He's a good football player. Doesn't surprise us at all. 'Surprised' is probably a strong word. I think the way college football is evolving right now, if you're surprised by much that happens in terms of player movement and those types of things, probably shame on you.

I don't know if 'surprise' is the right word, but the timing. To me, if you think a guy is going to leave a program, you would do it back in the wintertime, get there, go through the spring practice, start learning the offense, that type of thing, also their system, get to know his teammates.

Doesn't seem like it's affected him. He's playing really good right now. He's a good football player. We're going to have to try to do a good job of defending him on defense and also the special teams aspect.

Q. How do you recruit and retain wide receivers when they can look at what Charlie did, then takes off in a different program?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll never know what would have happened if he was here. We saw him make great improvement I thought this spring. We were really excited about that. Then he's not here. There's not much you can say about that.

Q. Do you ever say to yourself maybe you should have used him more?

KIRK FERENTZ: I would argue he's a much better player than he was. I thought he was a much better at the end of spring practice as a receiver. Upper echelon return guy. He's been really good. Obviously that was very evident going back to early 2020. But he's really progressed as a receiver. Not saying he was a bad receiver then, but he's a much better one, much better in April.

Q. Do you think this could negatively impact you from a recruiting perspective when it comes to receivers when they see what he did when he was here versus what he's doing at Purdue?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll worry about that later on. Right now, we're just trying to worry about Purdue.

It's hard to quantify all that stuff. Again, I would just suggest, me personally, I think he's a better receiver, was a better receiver at the end of spring practice than he was at the start. Like a lot of our players. A lot of our players grow and develop as they go through their careers. Same thing about Jack Campbell. Talk about good players, he's a better player now than he was two years ago, going through every phase. It's important.

You think about Charlie, started out at Maxwell. I don't know if he walked on up there. I think I heard that. He's a guy who has just done that, ascended. Shift over, George Kittle, was a good player when he left here. I would argue he's a much better player now. Good players ascend. That's part of the process.

Q. What does Charlie do well? How could he impact the game?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's always been fast. You saw that as a return guy. Plays with reckless abandon. He's very courageous. Good running skills. Very evident. Good judgment as a return guy.

To me at least, this is one person's opinion, I think he's refined his game as a receiver with each phase. It wasn't all in the spring, but it's been a process for him.

Obviously he's playing really well right now. He's got a good quarterback throwing it to him. One of the better guys in the conference. That's not to compare quarterbacks, I don't mean that by any means. He's done a great job.

Q. Is there one particular area for him to improve so much to go from 21 catches to 70-some catches?

KIRK FERENTZ: No. He's playing well. He's playing in this system where they throw the ball a lot. They had a really good guy that graduated, got drafted. He has kind of filled that void, I guess. I don't coach there, I don't want to say he's that guy. Seems to be the most prominent receiver right now.

Q. We can ask you this every week, but this would seem like a game where you could run the ball, keep their offense off the field, that would be huge.

KIRK FERENTZ: I think that's good against any opponent, if you can control the ball, keep the other team off the field. When you're talking about a team like Purdue, since Coach Brohm has gotten there, obviously it's an important thing to do.

Then they can get down the field pretty quickly when they have to. It's not like they're restricted to long drives. They're a really good offensive football team. They've played pretty much that way throughout the season. If we could hold on to the ball, it would be great.

If you look at the Wisconsin game, their most recent game, Purdue still had more possession time than Wisconsin.

It's not the full answer, but at least it's part of the answer for sure.

Q. We talked a lot this season about finding some sort of stability and momentum on the offensive line. Do you feel the line right now is as stable as it's been all season? Can you talk about what you see on film?

KIRK FERENTZ: As crazy as it sounds, I think we learned a little something in the Ohio State game, maybe gained a little traction. There wasn't a lot good there from an offensive standpoint.

Yeah, I think making the moves that we did make, I think at least what we did Saturday, I don't want to say we're settled in right now, but that's probably where we're at right now.

I think you learn about your players with each and every opportunity. Connor looks a little bit more comfortable in there. He's a good football player. Our objective is to get him where he can play his best. I think that's probably where he'll be.

Stephens is the same way. We're going to keep him in one position, he's so young. Then we have flexibility with Plumb can go either side, DeJong can go in and out. That's probably the end of the discussion right there. That's where we're at.

Q. Stephens, you brought him up, you went with him week one. Redshirt freshman. Highly recruited. What did you like about him? He's had some rough moments, but stayed in there. What do you like about him?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think he has so many characteristics that you're looking for with a lineman. The biggest thing, in my opinion, it's interesting we brought six linemen in a year ago, only two of them practiced last year basically. He was one of the guys that was in that four group.

It's really like he's a true freshman right now. I think that's the biggest challenge right now, there's a lot coming at him. He's handled it pretty well. I think we're at a point right now at least maybe we can give him a little bit of a break in there, take some pressure off him with rotation, that type of deal.

He's done a lot of good things. We're going to try to keep building. He's improved with each and every week. But every day is a learning experience. Yeah, the rest of the season will be that way for him.

Q. There's an ESPN report over the week that said your offensive line, other coaches said your offensive line was soft. Pretty prominent report.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, not that it didn't make it to my desk. Unnamed sources?

Q. I think it was opposing teams you played said that. Unnamed.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, right.

Q. What is your assessment? Has the offensive line been a little too soft?

KIRK FERENTZ: I say we've been inexperienced and inconsistent. That's what I am saying. That was what I was alluding to. Use that freshman class, six guys, four didn't practice. The way you get better is practice football.

Going back to the original discussion about the transfer student. You have to play football, practice out there, be out there especially in the lines. Experience helps, age helps typically. We talked about Beau. He's a young guy, uncommonly strong and physical for a guy his age.

Most linemen, it's a journey. At least the ones I've been around. I mean, whoever could use whatever term they use. I use the word inexperienced, not good enough at this point.

I think we made strides. Last year at this time we really started to gain some ground. I'm hoping that's going to happen this year, too. You're not going to get better if you're not on the field. It's really hard.

I'll go back as I'm thinking about it. DeJong has been out there, but DeJong hasn't been full speed. That affects performance. If we had guys that were healthy and full speed, we'd have them there. You play with the guys you have.

Again, when all the shots are getting fired, I'm just sitting back knowing what I know. All we can ask for our guys to do is the best they can do. I think they've done a pretty good job of that.

Hopefully we'll be less soft in the future, maybe more experienced, a little bit more able to control tempo because when you can do that, you're really in business. That's what every coach hopes for.

Q. Northwestern and to a lesser extent Rutgers, feels like you controlled the line of scrimmage better than you did in the other Big Ten games. Is it as simple as that?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's a big part of it. The offenses I've been around, it's easier to play offense if you can control the line. That's awesome. If you can at least break even, that's awesome, too. We haven't always been able to do that.

They're getting excellent coaching. That's one thing I do know a little something about. George (Barnett) is an outstanding coach. They're good, young guys. Those guys are working hard, trying their tails off. Sometimes you have to learn the hard way, too. That's called education.

Q. Northwestern is obviously not going to be your toughest opponent this year. How much of what Spencer finally did right on Saturday do you expect to be able to transfer into the next four games?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't mean this in a negative way, but it's kind of making assumptions about teams. As I said a week ago, when I looked at Northwestern, they had one game they weren't in. Other than that it was 10 points or less every game, then they won a conference game.

I look at a team I have a lot of respect for. Just like I mentioned, we haven't had a lot of success against Purdue the last couple years. It's not like we've been knocking Northwestern around either. We had a lot of respect going into that game. Still do. Excellent program. Got good young players that work hard.

When all phases are contributing, it sure makes it easier. Some players can win games on their own, I suppose. But it makes it a lot easier if you got some help in all phases. Starting up front is a great place. Someone has to run routes, catch the ball. Somebody has to be able to run it.

When I look at offenses, it's typically that. If you got a guy like Mahomes, that's awesome. I also say I think he played on a 6-6, 6-7 college team as a player. I don't think they went to a bowl game, which blows your mind if you think about it.

It still takes a team to get things done.

Q. In general with the things that Spencer was doing right on Saturday, when you take away the records and such, how much of that do you expect to carry over to the next four games?

KIRK FERENTZ: Depends on how we play around him. Have to help him. He's able to get his feet set, had a little time to do what he had to do, get the ball to where he needed to get it.

One of the plays I enjoyed the most is when he pulled the ball down and ran. Dumped it off to Monte. That's not a signature play for him necessarily. Just talking about Mahomes. If a guy can do something like that, that really helps the cause too. It's tough to keep that pocket clean every time you drop back.

Q. Into the rivalry part of the season, Wisconsin, Nebraska. Do you put Purdue in the same conversation?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, every game is a rivalry game. Every game in college football. Single elimination as far as I'm concerned. Still in conference. If you belong to a conference, they have that extra significance, too. We're not looking at the conference race by any stretch right now. We're just looking at this week.

For our team right now, I mean, we're fighting for our lives so we're just trying to make incremental gains. That's what it's been each and every week. We took some strides last week. We're right back trying to do the same thing this week.

Q. Purdue's offense, in totality, what about their scheme makes it challenging for a defense? How would you describe that chess match over the last several years?

KIRK FERENTZ: Again, talk about Coach Brohm's career, wherever you want to go, when he was a player he was awfully good. His coaching experience, as assistant, Western Kentucky, Purdue, they've always been very productive offensively, scored points, made yards.

I think probably the one thing that comes to mind, they run the football as well as throw it, run it effectively. They've got a back who has done a really nice job for

them. Then they get everybody involved in the passing game. Their tight end is a really good receiver. They have a good group of receivers, not just one guy.

I'm not saying it's the same as Ohio State, but Ohio State had a lot of guys across the board that really did a good job. It makes it a real challenge. That's kind of where it all starts.

Then a veteran quarterback who has been very, very productive.

Q. Historically there have been some contentious recruiting rivalries, if you will, between Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan State maybe about 10 years ago. Considering I think you had six guys visit here in June from Indiana, four to Purdue, two committed to you, do you put that in a contentious category or a really good off-season competition with Purdue?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's competition. Any time you go across state boundaries, which we do a lot because of our population, any time you leave your state, you're climbing a hill. You would assume the home state schools at least have an advantage. In some cases that's not the case, but most times it is. You kind of make that assumption.

We travel over there, you got to beat Indiana, Purdue on a player. Notre Dame is a little separate category. It's the same when we go into that home state school or home state schools as a starting point.

Ultimately recruiting just gets down to a guy feeling like, hey, the fit is good for him. There are some people that know off the bat, Iowa no, Purdue, Indiana yeah. I want to stay home, that type of thing. That's what you hope for, is in-state recruiter. It's not always that way.

Q. How much better are they now than when they were in Jeff's first year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Talking about recruiting or football?

Q. Recruiting.

KIRK FERENTZ: They've had success as a program. There's a period there once Joe Tiller left, there's a real dropoff. That's a huge advantage recruiting-wise, if your team is not doing well, the program is not strong, it's not a knock on anybody, it is what it is. That was a good time to be there. Now their program is very strong. He's done a great job building that thing.

Again, it's not just an offensive deal, it's a whole program. So we have great respect for them. I know it's going to be tough, just like any state we go into in the Big Ten, it's going to be tough because a lot of good programs right now.

Q. Broad question here, but what would you say was the main reason for Saturday's offensive success?

KIRK FERENTZ: Again, I just think probably throw it up front. Our line blocking was a little bit better than it's been this year for the most part. There were some games where they flashed. I just thought we played better in the run and pass up front.

Then skill guys did a good job, as well. Tight ends are playing really well, both Sam and Luke are doing a good job there. Receivers did their job, did a nice job. The backs ran well. Spencer played well. It's kind of how the offense works.

Q. Thinking back to the off-season, everybody talked about the linebackers, secondary. Feels like the defensive line was third fiddle. After that performance on Saturday, how would you assess the growth?

KIRK FERENTZ: I felt pretty good about the group really coming into the season. Last year we graduated some guys, so last year we were young. Thought those guys gained traction. This year VanValkenburg was the only guy we really lost. Kind of a collective effort. Maybe eight, to 10 guys had a chance to play pretty well. Kind of panned out that way. We've had some injury issues there, too. At least on that side we've got some depth. We don't have that depth offensively. That's been good for us.

I don't want to call us a no name defense or whatever, but we got a bunch of guys just doing a good job. Saturday is a good example. Kind of been this way all season long. We've done a good job getting to the quarterback, but a lot of times those are coverage sacks. We do a good job in the back end, easy throw. If you can do that, it gives guys a chance to get there up front if they work hard. Our guys work hard. They go hard when they're out there. We are able to rotate them so they stay fresh, which is an advantage.

Q. George Barnett's style, a little bit more cerebral than Tim Polasek. Is that accurate?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're very different personalities. They're both good coaches, though. Tim, he wanted to be a coordinator, which I understand. Felt better professionally. He was a guy we transformed into a line coach I guess. I think that probably helped him a little bit.

This is what George has done. George was weaned on that, if you will. He's an excellent teacher. That really jumped out in the interview. He's been that way ever since.

Obviously has the patience of a saint. It's been tough. I've been there. I think I alluded to this, 1983 we graduated seven seniors out of 10, which is not good. That next year, boy, we were in a very similar circumstance. We just worked through it. A year later we were in the Rose Bowl with some pretty good senior linemen, seniors and juniors. We got through it, did okay.

You just have to keep working at it.

Q. Do you think that's a possibility?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're not exactly veteran out there. I think DeJong and Jack are the two oldest guys. These guys are all young guys with great futures. They got good work ethics, all that. They need work is what they need. I think we got the right guys. We'd like to get them to age a little faster overall.

Q. What has been your impression of Jay Higgins?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not surprised he's doing a great job. I'm not surprised. He's one of the guys, if there's ever a benefit of having guys out because of injury, last spring we got to watch the backup linebackers. Jay just really emerged the entire spring practice.

Again, talking about players developing in growth. He's been good on special teams. We came out of spring all as coaches feeling like this guy could start for us right now. He played really well Saturday. Has been playing well.

He's got a great personality, a great team guy. Works extremely hard. We're thrilled to have him on our football team. He's got a really good future. I'm not surprised he's playing well right now.

Q. Sabastian Castro has also come in and played with Cooper playing corner?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's kind of where we're at right now. That's getting a little thin in the back end.

But, yeah, Sebastian has done a really nice job, too. Again, he's a guy we've been watching. He's done a good job on special teams. He's been ascending defensively. We've got him locked into that role. He's done a good job there.

Cooper is one guy that has rare position flexibility. We don't have much position flexibility because of our depth right now. He's pretty much locked into the corner spot. Doing a really good job there. Doing a great job on special teams, too. He's a football player.

Thank you.

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