

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Tuesday, November 5, 2019

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Coming off a bye week, it's good to get back and get started a little bit, and gave us a chance to the rest of the team, let them recharge a little for the last stretch here and also do some recruiting. I think all of us had a chance to get caught up on some stuff. Personally, I went out to a game Friday, it's always good to see some high school football, and Mary and I had a chance to go up to watch Central Michigan play, too, of all things. Steve was working up there and got to see them win their sixth game and become bowl eligible, so that was fun to be a fan and not be too emotionally invested in the game. Although I got sucked in after a little bit, so it was good.

But I think all-and-all we enjoyed it. It's good to be back into a game routine certainly and return to preparation for our next opponent.

If you look back at the schedule, we had a three-week block of preseason practice, three-game stretch, so that's six weeks there, then a five-week stretch of games after the first bye, and now finishing up with four weeks. So it's pretty symmetrical that way. I think we've seen a lot of growth with our football team in terms of the way they're playing but also I think from our leadership base, and that's certainly been pleasing to see that.

Overall, over eight games we've played hard, worked hard and competed hard. That's all you can ask from your football team.

As we start the month now, we move into November. November football is always significant, and it's good to be in a position where the games mean a lot, and it presents a lot of opportunity and certainly each week is going to be unique challenges as we move forward.

That being said, moving to the Wisconsin preparation and the game, our captains are the same four as the last time out, Nate Stanley, Toren Young, Kristian Welch, and Brady Ross.

As far as injuries go, Brandon Smith is going to be out for a while. We've covered that. We were hoping to get Welch and Wieting back. Right now they haven't done much so far, so I'm not optimistic we'll have those guys as the game gets closer.

Kyler Schott has been able to practice the last two days. So far, so good, looks like he's fine. So that's encouraging certainly.

And then as you start looking at Wisconsin, it really doesn't matter if you look at it over five years, 10 years, 15 years, if you look at our conference, Ohio State has led the conference in wins, and Wisconsin has been a solid No. 2 right behind them. That gives you a good level of the success they've had on the field, the consistency they've demonstrated as a football team.

When you look at them playing-wise they've had good players. The jerseys change but they've had good players, they've been well-coached and they typically just don't beat themselves. They play extremely hard and don't beat themselves; that's kind of what we're facing this week. It's interesting, 21 years ago when we got started, we were at the bottom of the league looking up to the top, and they were right at the top; they clinched a Rose Bowl berth against us there. It was their last game, our next-to-last game.

Just to put into perspective that that's the challenge we're facing right now, and we have great respect for their football team.

Going back to the 80s -- they've always been strong up front. They have a good offensive line, big, physical guys that do a good job. They're good at the receiver position and deep at the receiver position. Got a really good tight end that they find very frequently, and makes a lot of good plays for them.

Quarterback is playing extremely well, fullbacks are good, and they have as good a running back as we've seen during our time here, and we've played against some pretty good players, when you talk about Barkley, McCaffrey to name two that are doing pretty good right now. This guy is really a tremendous football player. Like most teams that are good on win-loss percentage, their defense has been consistently good and certainly no exception this year. They've had four shutouts and playing really good defense, giving up the fewest amount of yards in the Big Ten. You're playing an outfit that's tough to score against, and then special teams, just they work hard, well-coached, good schemes, and very, very productive, very, very aggressive.

All that on top of going on the road and playing in a really challenging environment, we've got a big challenge on our hands, and it's going to take a great week of preparation, and more importantly, we're going to have to play well on Saturday to have an opportunity to come out on top in this thing.

Q. How do you feel like you'll work Kyler back into the mix on the offensive line?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, he's not in the best football shape probably; he hasn't done anything in quite a bit. But the good news is it's chilly out there right now, so heat will not be a factor or humidity, and we'll see how the week goes. But we plan on playing him, and he'll play extensively if he's able to do so, so we'll see how it finishes up tomorrow.

Q. You mentioned Jonathan Taylor. He's the focal point of their offense. Is it an emphasis of limiting the big plays, just keeping him in front of you? How do you slow him down a little bit?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mentioned the receivers and their tight ends are really good players, so you can't play the run because they have guys that can throw it to -- those guys really know what to do with it, too, and they're deep. They're deep at the receiver position, four guys that seem like they've been there quite a while. The tight ends have always been good for them.

So you have to defend those guys, as well. But the biggest thing, and I'll go back to the game out here in '14, Gordon had two big plays in that game, one on a run and one on a pass, and when you play a guy as good as Taylor, you might be stopping him for a while, but it's that threat that he can take it and then go the distance. They did that against Michigan, and the first play that jumps into my mind. Those plays break your back. They're tough to come back from. The big thing is you're on edge the entire game as long as he's out there. You have to respect his ability to finish plays, and it's really a significant factor.

Q. Is Kyler Schott on track to start if he's healthy?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a possibility, yeah. I mean, he was a starter before he left, so yeah. We'll find out. He has two days, and so far, so good. But at least if nothing else, it adds to the mix in there.

Q. Will he stay at right guard?

KIRK FERENTZ: Probably, yeah.

Q. What's going on with Kristian Welch? I think they said a stinger, but it's been lingering.

KIRK FERENTZ: It's like a concussion, but it's not a concussion, just for the record, because it's such a sensitive thing. But injuries are funny. It's just stingers,

concussions, could be three days or it could be three months. I've seen it go both ways on both those. Some injuries are a little bit more predictable, stingers aren't, and it's just a matter of regaining strength and being able to maintain it.

He plays in a position where he's apt to get hit pretty frequently. If he was a placekicker we'd have a better chance, but right now I don't know that it's realistic he'll be able to play this week.

Q. Do you invest in Dillon at O-linebacker then, Dillon and Jack, or do you have other ways around that?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's a logical answer. That's what we've done thus far. I mentioned we've done some good things in eight games, and one of the nice things we've done or good things we've done is been able to absorb injuries. We've had a significant amount and guys have stepped in and filled in, and right now the best thing we're doing defensively is we're playing great team defense. Whether Dillon is in there, Jack is in there, it seems like we continue to play well.

All that being said, this is going to be a unique test for two young players to be involved in playing against a team like this. This is a really physical, veteran team that knows what they're doing.

Q. I think a lot of us out here probably skip over the importance and the difficulty of having to execute a silent count in a loud stadium. What are some of the more intricate parts of that, and does it kind of take away the advantage the offense has?

KIRK FERENTZ: A little bit, yeah. It makes it a challenge, and the only thing tougher is playing in a dome. Domes are even more problematic from that standpoint. Just requires a lot of concentration. You have to work on it certainly during the week. But yeah, the biggest thing is concentration, and there are times where it can get so loud where you actually have to look at the ball. That's probably the last thing you want to do as an offensive lineman or -- skill position it's not as big a deal, but for linemen it's tough that way, especially if you've got good defenders you're responsible for blocking.

Q. Does it take things out of the playbook?

KIRK FERENTZ: Hopefully not, but it can get tough.

Q. Is this the type of game maybe like last year's bowl game where even if the run is not working you have to keep pounding it just to bleed the clock and try to keep them honest?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think you do. Part of the reason it's tough to run against these guys, first of all, they've got a good front, no question about that, but

they do a really good job of getting on top of people, and that happened to us last time we were up there. The score was kind of deceiving actually at halftime. We got two turnovers in that game. Otherwise it would have been a much wider version.

But if you look at a couple of games they've played this year, first of all, their non-league games were over almost before they got going. A quarter into it they do a really good job, if the door is open they get in there. Two of their Big Ten games at home, I mean, it was over at halftime basically. They get up on you and then you've got to -- you can only be so patient with the run game when you're losing by a significant amount of points. They just play really good complementary team football, and the that's helped their run stats for sure. But all that being said, if it's 0-0 it's still tough to make yards against them, and it's tough to hit a big play. That's really a hard thing to do. They close things down pretty quickly.

Q. There's two schools of thought when you're preparing for an opponent like this that kind of the one that matches you on physicality, and that one is keep everybody off their feet and don't get anybody hurt during the week, or practice like you're going to feel it on Saturday, and it sounds like your players have -- you've kind of executed the second strategy of making it as physical in practice to kind of prepare them for Saturday. What do you think is the reason for that, and is that something you've done every year when you prepare for a Wisconsin?

KIRK FERENTZ: If it were the last game of the year, it might be a different story, and it will be a different story as we transition, but it's just kind of part of our plan. But that's how we practice. You play the game in pads, you practice in pads. We try to be smart when we get into November, but we just came off a week where we were really trying to pull back and let the guys get recharged.

I think it's important this week that we fit our pads and we'd better get them fit really well and really tight because these guys are going to help fit them on Saturday, I know that. So we'd better be ready to go.

Q. What sold you on Nate Stanley five years ago, and what sold him on you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I think we were fortunate probably in a couple regards. He came to camp early. We really liked him as a prospect throwing the football, and what you learn about him -- what you get to learn about the family, his mom and dad are tremendous people, and all the other things he was doing at his high school in other sports and just the kind of young man he is and student and all that. He just seemed to

us like the type of guy that you would like to have as a leader in your program. It's a leadership position.

And then the good fortune was that they had some connection to us. His dad actually grew up just across the border in Illinois, and then Mom is from Iowa. They were both Wartburg grads, so had the Reese Morgan connection going that way, but probably the biggest break was that Coach Chryst was at Pittsburgh at that time, and he knew of him from his time in Wisconsin, and so I think obviously it was us and them pretty much, and we had a little geographic advantage on that one.

But I think the telling thing is when Paul took the job up at Wisconsin, Nate and his family never wavered. We were concerned about that for obvious reasons, but they never wavered, and I think they were thinking on that, and I don't want to speak for Nate, but it was just kind of unless something happened here, they were committed. We really appreciate that, and they were great to deal with in the recruiting process and obviously have been great since he's been on our football team. Just a great family.

Q. Kirk, Wisconsin has had three different head coaches since Barry was coaching there, but the style has -- it changed a little bit under Anderson, but for the most part the style hasn't changed. Is that Barry?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's probably a logical assumption. I can't say it is or isn't because I don't work there. But I know this: Barry and I worked together for seven years, and just knowing what I know about Barry and what I know about playing the teams that he was coaching, I think he had a really clear vision of what it takes to be successful, and it really has meshed well there. He felt like Wisconsin was a sleeping giant when he went there, winter of '89-'90, and I think his words were prophetic that way.

He and his staff did a great job. Bill Callahan was on that staff. He had some outstanding coaches on that staff, Brad Childress, so those guys really got it up and running, and I think the formula is one that's probably time-tested and probably a little bit of Barry's DNA as a Nebraska player and then coaching under Coach Fry, playing defense around the football well and being good on the kicking game, those three things, and that's what you see, and you've seen it pretty consistently now since Barry went there in 1990.

Q. Fair to say you and Barry have some similarities in how you think the game should be played?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think probably all of us that worked together in the '80s, whether it's Dan McCarney, Bill Snyder, guys that also had good runs in

being successful in their programs. I think you see some commonality there for sure. I always laugh, Coach Fry with his white pants and sunglasses and exotics. Everybody is looking on the periphery and it was all about playing good defense and not beating yourself. That really was the secret, and especially in our big games, that's what we did.

Q. When you look at Tyler Goodson in the last game, I think he was only on the field five plays maybe in the first half, and then in the second half the first major series you fed him like eight times and he seemed to have a really good run there. How has he grown on the field because you've talked about his kind of intangibles, but how has he grown on the field, and is he in a position where he might be kind of the No. 1 back at some point?

KIRK FERENTZ: With every good play that a player has, our confidence in them grows, and then we get to see what they're doing in the classroom, on the field and practice field and all those kinds of things. He's done nothing but just keep putting positive credits in the bank, so we're certainly gaining confidence in him. He's playing well out there on the field and learning with every snap, and it's really, really important for young players. We feel really good about him. We have no anxiety when he goes in the game, or at least no more than you would normally, and feel good about all of our backs right now. All three of those guys are really doing a quality job and I think they all have a role on our football team.

Q. He seems to have a good burst. He's also physical for his size. What other physical attributes do you see in him that really works in this system?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we thought he was a good prospect, and that's how recruiting is. You think you know what you're getting, and then when you get them on campus and just get out on the field with them, there's certain feelings you get. And I always mention Abdul Hodge; just standing behind him just the quickness that we saw him demonstrate on the field was a little bit different than maybe what I anticipated.

So I think everything about Tyler has been great. He's just got a really good skill set, pretty much can do everything and is a willing blocker. He's not as big and mature as he will be as he grows in the program, but there's really not a lot he can't do right now I don't think, and that's -- maybe play 60 snaps, and we haven't tried that yet. That'll come sooner or later. But no, he's doing a good job.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Welch again. There's a guy from Wisconsin, senior linebacker, team captain, doesn't get to go back. What can you kind of articulate the emotions --

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll take him back and he'll go out for the toss if he's not playing. But that's football. It's the worst part about football, frankly, the injuries. It's just so disappointing. I can't tell you how hard he's worked. He's been one of our hardest working players. He's so conscientious, so bought in. But it's not always fair. Life is not always fair. Football is hardly fair. But he's making a contribution. We've got two young guys playing for him right now, and he's out there coaching those guys every day working with them, talking in their ear, and that's really valuable, too. I'm sure he's doing the same thing with the whole group. He's just a veteran player that we have a lot of respect for and it's a tough break. But that's the nature of this game, unfortunately, so it's a tough deal.

Q. Is the timeline for Brandon Smith still pretty much the same that it was last week?

KIRK FERENTZ: His rehab is going well, but I don't know what that means exactly. It's an ankle injury, and it's going to take some time. Just one of those shots.

Q. With Nate Wieting out, how much have you had to speed up Sam's learning curve?

KIRK FERENTZ: I have no choice. They're in the Army right now, so Beyer, him and Drew Cook, that's kind of where we're at, so those guys are getting some work. Schulte is getting a little work. We're not going to change what we do, so we're going to keep pushing forward. They're doing a good job. It was good for Shaun to make a big play the other day. That was certainly significant, and we've been anticipating growth. Good news is he's been healthy. Unfortunately he had some injury issues the last couple of big practice periods going back to spring, last December I believe it was. So it kind of impeded his growth. But he's doing a good job, and again, good for him to have some experience. I'm not sure Sam knows what the heck is going on anyway, so it's just as well. I'm joking about that, he's doing okay. We've got his head spinning a little bit, but he's doing a good job, and Drew is doing a good job, too.

Q. The two programs kind of mirror each other in styles; is that easier to prepare for or can that be tough?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yes and no. I think in some ways there's a lot of parallels, but schematically we're probably different. Like our offensive blocking systems are probably different. We're not near as big as they are, although I've got to -- we have two big tackles. I've got to get used to that. It's unusual for us to have guys over 300. But we do have a couple guys that are -- so they might be like on the Wisconsin JV, our two good tackles. But those guys are just huge. They are so big, and they're really good at the way they block and they do a great job, and we certainly don't have a running

back to simulate what we're going to see on Saturday, so that makes it tough. And then defensively we're similar in our approach in terms of what we believe is important, but they play a whole different scheme there, too.

It's an interesting preparation for sure, and it's hard for our scout team to really do a good job of showing us what we're going to have to face on Saturday.

Q. Seems like you've had to face every good NFL running back in the last seven or eight years, going back to Le'Veon Bell and Gordon and David Johnson, McCaffrey --

KIRK FERENTZ: Thanks for bringing up Johnson. I forgot about that one.

Q. Is Taylor in that same category --

KIRK FERENTZ: I just threw the Barkley and McCaffrey name in there because I listen to the radio coming to work and going home, right, so somebody, one of those experts, was just talking about those two guys might be the two best in the game right now, and I thought to myself, boy, what great luck for us. Got to see Barkley a couple times, and then we make it out to the Rose Bowl and we get to play McCaffrey, and boy, was he good. What a good player. And then Barkley, I've said that before, that's as good a performance as I've ever seen back a couple years ago in Kinnick.

Those guys are just really top-flight players, seem like top-flight young people. And that's the thing that's intriguing about Taylor to me, is just as good a player as he is, it sounds like he's a better young person. That's what's good about college football. It's kind of neat that way. I'd rather watch those guys on TV. My good luck was, okay, my first two years here, we never played against Brees, right, and we never played against (Drew) Henson from Michigan was a first-rounder, so we saw him on film two years, never played him. That luck has run out apparently. We'll have to get ready for Saturday.

Q. Nate Stanley, he also has a homecoming here, said he felt a lot of nerves two years ago. What has changed for him, and why is he better prepared to lead you guys this weekend?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, he's so much more veteran, I guess, or experienced, whatever the best word would be there. He's been through a lot now. Good, bad or indifferent, and that helps a player. He'll still be antsy out there, and it's a tough road game in a tough environment, but he's played in those now. He's got more experience under his belt, and I think he'll probably handle it a little bit better. Hopefully all of us around him will handle it better, too, and help him a little bit more because there wasn't much good that we

did up there a couple years ago, and we'll find out it was either an aberration or a trend. Hopefully not a trend.

Q. The styles are completely different, but can you take anything away from the way Michigan attacked you with their blitzes and the way even though Wisconsin is really gap sound and they don't necessarily blitz a lot but they come from a lot of different directions, is there something that can be applied to this game as far as protection goes?

KIRK FERENTZ: It probably wouldn't be the first parallel I'd draw in all honesty. I think they're probably different teams that way, yeah.

Q. A lot of the blitzes from Michigan were very athletic linebacker types and then on the edge they tend to have kind of 235-pound guys instead of --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I guess that probably wouldn't be the comparison I would draw. But I mean, if we don't play better than we did against Michigan offensively, we're going to have a hard time scoring points. I do know that.

And they'll have some stuff for us, but they've got two guys on the outside that rush really well in their sub package and strong guys inside, and they have a good blitz package. I'm not saying these guys are the Pittsburgh Steelers, but it kind of reminds me of the Steelers when I coached in the National Football League. That would be the comparison I'd go to. They have a lot of different ways to just put the pressure on you and they're kind of subtle with some of the things they do. But they're impactful, and they made it tough to move the ball and score points.

Q. Do you copy off Lovie's plan at all? Everybody saw the way their defensive lineman broke down the line of scrimmage and kept their linebackers clean?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we try to keep our linebackers clean. That's kind of how we're built. Our guys up front, that's their job is to keep those guys clean and then our linebackers and safeties have to get there and make plays. That's going to be the deal.

But, they've only really had a couple competitive games, and that's one of them certainly, and then the big factor there was turnovers, too, and that was a big factor in our game last year. We had two really costly turnovers in the kicking game that just really impacted the game in a negative way for us, and that's -- but to Illinois's credit, too, they did something with them. When they got those turnovers, they cashed them in and got points.

Q. A lot made obviously about Nate's homecoming,

but Toren Young coming back, as well, first time that he's been a main contributor. Probably not the first time that you've had players going back for road games. How has he maybe handled it and how do you coach that for the guys that there could be some added elements for stuff like that?

KIRK FERENTZ: Seems like he's handled it well so far. That's the good news. And probably the typical thing there is that usually they have an inordinate number of ticket requests. That's a pain in the neck for them. And then secondly, sometimes players will try to do too much when they're at home. But I'm standing here, first thought I have is like Ed Hinkel laying out in 2002 at Penn State for a touchdown in the end zone; Jovon Johnson had a big pick there back in their home state. I'm thinking positive thoughts about like maybe Toren just knifing through there for a 50-yard gain or something like that. Hopefully it'll give him a little juice and a little impetus to be successful out there, but you worry about guys pressing too hard sometimes.

Q. You mentioned about burying teams early. Does that lend to maybe a more aggressive game plan from the onset to try to not get behind, not trying to play catchup?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the message to the team is we need to be ready at kickoff. 3:05, we'd better be ready, because if you're not -- that really was the story of the Michigan-Michigan State game. It was over pretty quickly. I think Michigan State had around 38 snaps? They had like four or five three-and-outs and a six-and-out, and that was in the first half, and it was 17-0. Now again you're chasing 17 points, it's hard to have a balanced patient game plan when you do that. The Michigan game was 28-0, they turned it over three times. So forget about that if you're going to turn it over, might as well go home because it's not going to be pretty.

The message there is if you're not ready to go, these guys know what to do with it. They're going to be ready to go. They've demonstrated that time and time again, not just this year but kind of historically these guys show up ready to play.