

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: Good Afternoon. I would like to start by extending some congratulations. Originally it was going to be to Cooper, but I want to announce that Aaron Kampman is going to be inducted into the Packer Hall of Fame. Tremendous individual and obviously had a great career in the NFL as well as at Iowa and has gone on and done a lot of really neat things.

He is raising a beautiful family and coaching high school football and doing some things in the private sector on top of it. Just really happy for him and pleased for that recognition for him.

Then regarding Cooper, happy to see him as a Bednarik semifinalist. We have a couple of guys on different lists. Just happy for the recognition for those guys. All tremendous people as well as really good players. So happy about that also. See where that all goes.

As far as the game on Saturday, a good team win. It was a total team victory. Happy about that. We showed growth and improvement in several areas, basically every area; happy about that.

Played penalty free, which is hard to do, and good clean football there. Came out of the game fairly healthy. Feel pretty good about that as well this time of year.

Then a little side note, coincidentally or however you want to put it, but it's 2 out of 3 games right now that have been potentially impacted by the replay system. I have some feelings about that. I'm a little confused on what conclusive means, what the definition of that is. I thought the spirit of the replay was to correct obvious mistakes, but I always think about Marv Levy and that NFL Club, you guys are over-officious. I think that fits.

I hope we as a conference or as a collective body just go back and take a look at that again because it's kind of a flawed system at this point.

Moving to Illinois, captains are the same guys: Joe Evans, Jay Higgins, Logan Lee and Luke Lachey.

Injury-wise, we get Stilianos back. He should be healthy, back practicing now. I don't see Beau Stephens making it for sure, and Diante Vines very unlikely. Otherwise, I think everybody's got a chance.

Obviously I know Coach Bielema, know him very well, known him for a long, long time. He was a player here at the tail end of my time as an assistant. He's done a great job as an assistant, and now he's had three coaching jobs, head coaching jobs, and been successful everywhere, and he's doing a great job at Illinois, too.

They had a good football team last year, and they come in here right now with a lot of momentum. They've won 3 out of their last 4 games, playing really well. It's an interesting situation where not only have they won, but they have two quarterbacks that are playing well. Their team has great confidence in both those guys.

Playmakers pretty much everywhere you look offensively. They have a good group of receivers. Number 1 is a highlight guy. Have a really talented back, very versatile. He got hurt, and then a true freshman came in and did a great job there, and as I mentioned, two quarterbacks. I think they have three or four guys back on that offensive line. So they're a good team that way.

Defensively, most season been very talented. Up front got a couple guys that are challenging, pose problems for you. Done a good job in special teams as well. Number 1 returns punts, and they have a young guy playing the kick return game who's doing a good job as well.

They come in with momentum. We have a big challenge on our hands. We have to be at our best on Saturday, just like each and every week.

Senior Day, always a bittersweet thing. We have 20 guys, and if my breakdown is right, we have 4 sixth-year seniors, 12 fifth-year guys, I think it is, and 4 fourth-year guys. It's a good mix of guys.

When you look at Senior Day, one thing that always kind of jumps out, some guys are really well-known. Obviously Jay Higgins, go right down the list, there are some guys that are really well-known.

But I think about a guy like Kyler Fisher, which is kind of representative of our football team. Came here as a walk-on, pretty much unheralded. Kind of quiet, not overly aggressive as a first year player. But kept gaining ground, kept working hard and gaining confidence. Next thing you know he's playing special teams, playing on our sub defenses and has earned a starting role. He's been a really good football player for us.

Off the field, he does a great job in the classroom, just an exemplary citizen, and ended up being one of our Hawkeye Challenge captains, the out of season competition we do. Not only is he a captain, but one of our top point getters, which involves academic work, community service. I think he was in the top five with our community service hours, that type of thing. So just does things right. He's a high quality guy and has ended up being a really good football player.

I'm just bringing that up because you talk about building a team and having a team. It takes all kinds of guys. Not every guy is going to be Cooper DeJean. You need guys like Kyler that just do a great job and keep improving with every turn. Like I say, it's always tough. You're happy, it's a celebration for great careers, but it's also tough to say good-bye to guys. Although in this case, we still have a lot of football left in front of us. Just throwing that out there.

Then the other part of Senior Day is parents having a chance for them to be on the field and be recognized. Just appreciate the sacrifice, the support that they lend to their sons. Then also appreciate the fact they entrust us to work with their sons. A lot of good things there. So that's a special day.

Last but not least, the Kid Captain this week, Cooper Estenson, from North Liberty. He was a healthy 9-year-old and started acting lethargic. They discovered he had leukemia, so he underwent pretty aggressive treatment, including chemo. Fought that for a couple of years.

Right now he's an 11-year-old fifth grader and doing really well. He's still getting treatment, but he's playing sports, playing outdoors. I guess he really enjoys art. I know he's looking forward to being on the sideline waving up to the hospital, and it will be great to have he and his family here. Like always, it's great to have a Kid Captain with us.

Last but not least, we turn our attention to Saturday. Hard to believe it's the last home game. Once the season gets going, it goes fast. That's kind of where we're at.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the defensive tackle tandem at Illinois. Keith Randolph is really good, but in particular, No. 4, Johnny Newton, may be the best in

college football. Not only what are the challenges, but how can you prevent him from just completely taking over the game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Our guys are going to have to be at their best. He's typically into the boundary, so he'll play both sides, left and right side. He's really got an unusual combination. He's extremely physical, big physical guy, but he's also really athletic. It's tough to block him, tough to get in on him. And if you do, you're not going to stay in there long. He's a rare talent.

I'm not saying he's Simmons in the bowl game that year, but there probably can be some comparisons. He's a guy that's just a really unusual combination of size, strength, speed, and agility. It's going to be tough.

Then Randolph's on the other side typically of the field. Sometimes they mix that up a little bit, but having two guys like that in there and a big transfer guy playing nose who's done a good job too. It's tough to run up in the middle against these guys. It really is.

Q. Got the opportunity to potentially get the sole possession of the Big Ten West title this weekend. How much would that mean to be able to do that considering these types of things don't happen every day, and the opportunity to actually do it in front of your home crowd?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's certainly a goal. At the start of the season, you want to be the Big Ten West champs if you have that opportunity. If we were on the other side, it would be the other. The bigger goal right now is just winning games.

One thing you try to explain to the players, and I think they figured this out, there's no downside to winning and there's a lot of downside to losing. Not that it's all about winning and losing, but that's what you wind up and compete for. Obviously it would be great just to win. It's always great to win in Kinnick, and rarely is it easy.

So that's kind of how this game's going to fall in line.

Q. The defense didn't exactly struggle to start the season, but now they're, once again, among the top ten in college football. What have you seen from them, how they've continued to, well, get better incrementally, but now those things are starting to add up, and they're really among the best.

KIRK FERENTZ: I've said it to several people. We're clearly better defensively than we were six, eight weeks ago. That's what you hope for with all of our guys. You

hope they're improving, whether they're experienced or not experienced. Probably the biggest difference, at least from my vantage point, is non-experienced players have a chance to improve dramatically, whereas a guy that's pretty good is not going to be as dramatic, typically gains in the weight room sometimes. Younger guys can improve more and more dramatically.

I think it's a residual. The guys have played well, they work hard in practice, they prepare, they study, and then the other component, I think, is you gain some confidence when you do have success, and we've had some. So I think that kind of breeds a little bit more of it. Then the collective power of all that, the synergy that's involved.

Then you have guys that have played a lot of football. They're doing a good job. Jay has played a lot of football, but not in that role. You lose Campbell, and then for him to step in and do what he's done, that's impressive. But that's allowed our whole team to also keep playing well.

We lost a lot of really good players off that defense last year. You talk about Kaevon, Riley, Jack, Seth, Lukas. So it's a real credit to the whole group. They've all kept working, and collectively they're playing pretty well right now.

Q. With all the distractions this year, how has this team been able to stay the course and kind of keep the train on the tracks? And how proud are you of them to be where they are right now despite maybe some of the off the field distractions?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really proud of them and really happy for them. Good things that happen, we try to like create a framework for them and give them some guidance, but ultimately it all comes down to players play the game. They win and lose out in the field, and they're the ones that have kept the thing on the tracks because they're the ones who didn't allow distractions to distract them.

There's a million of them. They come at you. We've got different forms of them coming each and every week. Now we've got to deal with a little success. We scored 22 points and got a shutout, so it's like we're world champions.

We've still got a lot of work to do, and they understand that. Yeah, but ultimately it gets down to the players. If you have the right kind of guys on your team, you've got a chance to do some good things. I don't know how good we are, but we're becoming a really good team in terms of the teamwork part of it. The rest of the stuff will just play itself out on the field.

Q. Talking to some of the players today, Jay Higgins

called you a Hall of Fame head coach. Nico thanked you. Something that came up to me about Jay, he just said there's no reason for him, being a Hall of Fame coach, to remain so invested and so passionate about what you do every day. Just kind of curious for you where does that passion come from or derive from?

KIRK FERENTZ: It sounds like he's wanting me to retire. Is that what he's getting at? Calling me old or what? (laughter) It's just what I like. I mean there's fewer and fewer things I enjoy anymore, quite frankly. I can go off on a tangent on that one for about a half hour about college football, but the thing that hasn't changed since 1981 really -- I'll go back the year before that, my first year in college football is 1980 at Pitt. I still talk to guys on that team. That's however many years ago, 43, 44 years ago.

We had good guys at Pitt, and we had outstanding guys my 34 years here. So that's the best part of coaching. It was the best part of teaching, when I was a teacher. Just kind of I guess it was my niche, and at least I was lucky enough to find it, and I've been lucky enough to be around really good people.

So it's what I enjoy. I enjoy being on the field. I enjoy being in this building. A lot of the other nonsense, it is what it is, and it's just life changes and there's all kinds of stuff going on. But I've been really lucky to be in good places with good people, and that's the common denominator.

We eat pretty good. I like food, so we get ice cream every now and then and some other stuff. So it's all good.

And the weather's been great. We've had one really cold day so far this season. Two weeks ago today. Other than that, it's been great.

Q. You've had Logan Lee running around here for five years now. I know he came here as a kid trying to figure out a position, and he started a lot of football games for you. What kind of impact has he had on the field and then off the field in this locker room and in this program?

KIRK FERENTZ: Coincidentally, I just mentioned Aaron Kampman a little while ago. When Aaron was here, he was like a 45-year-old guy on our team. He was married too, coincidentally, as an underclassman. He and Linde got married spring of their junior year. The parallels are pretty uncanny.

They're both just mature beyond their years, focused. You worry about those guys having enough fun sometimes. Did they miss out on some of the good stuff you do in



college? I know Aaron turned out pretty happy and pretty content, and I think Logan is too.

Just came with an unusual maturity. He's been a good guy that way. He's like a lot of guys, going through the hardships. He's had injuries, surgeries, which again people forget about what these guys go through physically.

The hard work involved coming back from rehab. He's done all that. Always had a great attitude, and it continues to grow, great leader.

To your point, like when he came out, we weren't sure what he was. We knew he was a football player, we just didn't know what. It's been fun to watch him go from a guy who's a little bit robotic and mechanical early in his career to being a really good football player and a really good defensive lineman.

You can't do it if you're not on the field. He missed a lot of time and playing catch-up. But, boy, he's played really well now for a couple of years. We'll miss him on a lot of levels, his leadership, besides being a great player.

Q. Phil Parker was nominated for the Broyles Award again this year. It just came out. He had no idea he had been nominated when he walked by a little bit ago. Just the importance and what your defense has done in the last month with just one touchdown allowed.

KIRK FERENTZ: On that topic, I tell Rita to hit the resend button from last year or the year before or the year before. We won't win it because we're not -- well, it is what it is.

He's done a great job coaching. He has been here all 25 years, I appreciate that. He's had two jobs since he became a full-time coach, which I think says a lot about him and his career. A, he has been invited to stay both places because he's phenomenal. He's an outstanding coach.

And just the way those guys have played is really very impressive. It's a team effort. I'm sure he would tell you that or has told you that. He certainly learned well from Norm. Norm was the all-time best, and we've been fortunate to have real continuity in our system, and it has worked out for us.

They're continually tweaking it, looking at it, adjusting it. You have to because things change, but it's still pretty much the way it was 25 years ago. Obviously a little bit better now, but Phil's done a great job.

Q. For those of us who have to make predictions for Saturday's game, which version of Deacon Hill do you expect to show up, the first half version last Saturday

or the second half?

KIRK FERENTZ: Them or us? It all goes together. What happened in the second half, it's a process. You just keep playing. Then hopefully you're learning during the game, and you just keep chipping away.

I thought from the start we were playing better than we have played offensively. And defensively we were doing a lot of good things. On the special teams, we were contributing. That's how we play. Hopefully you get better as the game goes on. No two games are ever the same. They've all got a life of their own. You play them as they play out.

In a perfect world like that, that's what we're looking for. Keep chipping away and keep getting a little bit better. At some point hopefully you build a lead. I saw the stat about us being whatever it is, 70-2 with eight-point leads. It's better to play with the lead, no question about it. That's something we're always trying to do, but it's easier said than done sometimes.

Q. Wanted to ask about Nico. What all do you remember about him like early in his time at Iowa? Are there just any kind of favorite stories or anything you can share?

KIRK FERENTZ: We liked him in high school, but then we encouraged him to do a year of PG, and he did that, Avon Old Farms, who my running mate in college actually went to Avon Old Farms, great lacrosse player, a guy named Jeff Brown.

So Nico went there, and we recruited him. Since he's been here, he's been fantastic. He's done a good job. We probably should have recruited him out of high school in retrospect, but it's all worked out.

Seems like he's gotten a little turbo boost the last couple weeks. Looks like the 22-year-old Nico instead of the 28-year-old. Anyway, he's a great guy. He has a great personality. He is a great guy, and I think our season tickets have increased dramatically since he joined our team.

He has an entourage of like 50 people, 60 people come out here every game. It's crazy. He's pretty popular at home, too. His dad was -- if you talk to the former baseball coach at UConn, there are two people on his all-time favorite list, and Nico's dad was one of them. He's a catcher and just a tough, competitive guy. I think Nico certainly fits in that. He's done a great job for us.

Q. Is Noah going to get to go through Senior Day at

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all?

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely, yes. He's more than earned that. I did my little three-minute documentary today on the Big Ten Network today about that whole situation. I'll probably just keep my mouth shut.

Yeah, he is so respected by everybody in this building. Again, I'm not minimizing speeding tickets, but that's really what this thing is the equivalent of, so it's tough. I'm sorry.

Q. It sounds like from talking to Tory Taylor today, this is probably going to be his last game he plays at Kinnick Stadium. I'd be curious to hear maybe some of your first experiences when you first met Tory and what he's meant to the program. I know he's going to pass the all time punt record, passing Jason Baker here. What's it going to mean to the team trying to replace a kid like that?

KIRK FERENTZ: His story is so unusual. It puts a smile on my face. Talking about the ills of college football right now, he was the anti-story of that. He got here, and I remember pulling up to Purdue, and there was nobody on the sidewalk. It was kind of weird. It was like a high school scrimmage, Big Ten game, nobody there. Like, whoa, science fiction movie.

His first game ever, and he was so naive to college football, American college football. It was kind of refreshing actually, so it was kind of neat. He's become Americanized now. He's part of the pack here.

To watch his evolution, he was obviously talented then, had raw ability and talent. The one thing about him this year that I'll never forget is just the way he's practiced. He's a real craftsman now. He went from a guy who kicked the ball. That's what he did forever, grew up doing that, punting the ball and all that stuff, but now he is just like -- he has such clear focus and intent every time he's out there at practice. He's really practiced at a high level.

I know he had a so-so game two weeks ago, but I told him afterward I'm just so confident you're going to come right back because you watch a guy every day. And that's maturity, that's experience, that's really putting things in the bank and really using them to your advantage. That's a real credit to him. He's really learned how to be a really focused college football player.

He has been a really strong team leader on top of that. He has a unique perspective, but he's a really good teammate. He cares about his teammates deeply. Specialist is kind of funny. It's like a relief pitcher in baseball. Those guys stand out in a different dugout, and they're away from the

main team and all that, but there's some parallels to that. When they go out there, everybody watches to see what they do.

He's in that situation, but he's done a great job bonding with everybody. I think he enjoys life. I know he seems like he's really enjoyed his time here in Iowa. We've been fortunate to have him come through this place and be part of us. So just thrilled for him. His future, I wish him all the best obviously moving forward, all those guys.

Q. I think it's been the last seven seasons you've had a Schulte in the building. What has Quinn provided from a leadership standpoint? Is it kind of something that you know what you're getting when you have a high school coach who's been as productive as Duane's been and you're getting his kid?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think there's commonalities there over time. You think about Drew Tate's dad, his stepdad was a coach. I can go right down the list. I remember coaching Mike Devlin, his dad was a coach, great guy, John Devlin.

When they grow up around it -- part of the advantage of a coach's kid, they see the hard stuff, not just the good stuff or the easy stuff. They're not just fans. They don't show up at the stadium, oh, this is nice. Everybody's got game uniforms on. They see the tough parts of competition and the disappointment and all those things that come with it. I think they have a little bit different perspective maybe.

Duane is an outstanding coach, not a good coach, outstanding teacher, and that whole family is first class. They're just tremendous.

Then Q's done a great job. We talked about Kyler coming as a walk-on, and they kind of come in quietly, but you watch him gain confidence each and every year. And he's worked extremely hard like Kyler. Like all these guys, they work so hard.

That's the fun part, whether it's Tory, all the guys we're talking about, where they are four years after they get here or five years, it's a big difference. It's kind of a neat thing to see.

Q. We were joking with some of the guys that they were saying they're not exactly excited to run out of the tunnel in case they show too much emotion. You've been at a lot of these Senior Days. What do you tell them about balancing the taking it all in, which I know is important, but balancing it with putting it aside once the game starts and the best ways to do that?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's hard. It's easier to talk about it and say here's what you ought to do, but I think it's kind of interesting to hear like the first time they come up in the swarm is usually a pretty emotional thing for them and their parents. Then you close it out at the end of your career the other way and you come out without a swarm and get introduced. It's probably more moving.

I've done it as a parent three times. Yeah, it's a pretty special thing. So there's going to be those highs and lows that they've got to go through, and then somehow they've got to scramble and recover. I think we have five, eight minutes or so to get their stuff back together.

It's easier said than done, and it is emotional. I wish I had the answer. 25 years, still searching.

Q. Coach, I know you've said in the past, when it come to the pantheon of great Iowa punters, Reggie Roby is 1 and everybody else is 2. But when it comes to fan favorites, you see the shirts. When Tory's name goes up on the jumbotron, everybody goes crazy. Even three and outs, Tory gets the pop. As far as fan favorites go, where does he stand among the players you've seen in college over the years?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm in that fan club too, just so you know that. In fairness to Reggie, we didn't have social media and all that stuff going on. He'd probably sell a few T-shirts too.

One thing about Reggie, I got here his last two years, I heard about his prowess in high school, he probably could have been All-Big Ten at a couple positions based on what I know, maybe a couple sports. He's just a great athlete. I'm not suggesting Tory is not, but Reggie Roby was a first-class guy. He was in a special tier.

But I'll tell you, Tory with every step -- and Jason Baker had a pretty good NFL career too. Those are pretty good names you're throwing around. Yeah, Tory -- plus he's got the advantage of being Australian. He's got the accent, all that stuff. He's got a great personality. I think he's just a likable person. You've really got to like him. I especially like him when he punts the ball well. I have a fondness of people like that too. So, it's pretty good. Yeah, he's a great story.

I'll go back too. I think whatever the technicality was, he couldn't collect money, whenever it was, a year ago and donated it to a really, really worthy cause. I think that tells a lot about the kid too, just how he's wired, how he's been raised. He's got a great family. So it's a pretty special thing. Usually starts at home.

Q. I don't know whether or not to combine them, but they'd be too different here. I'll start with this one. Joe Evans is another great story. You've built your career on great stories like that, as much as anything. Walk-on, quarterback, switches to defensive end, beats out some scholarship guys to become your starter, and then works his way up to being a team captain, almost a lot like Bret Bielema in some ways. When you look at Joe Evans, is he the type of story that you can share with guys yet to come here because of the way he's worked his way and then become really important player for you?

KIRK FERENTZ: Absolutely. I think he's really representative of the kind of guys we're looking for. I remember when he did come, and first you hear about him in meetings. Then he comes and you meet the guy, and he comes from a great family. His dad's an educator, great family.

But I'm thinking to myself, okay, what are we going to do with this guy? Linebacker, quarterback? He's not very tall, all that stuff, until you see him on the field. The first time you see this guy on the field, he is going 100 miles an hour, just has a great tempo.

It's kind of funny because, when he showed up the first time, I looked at him like he was a 6 foot guy, and now when I stand around him, I'm looking at him going, I think he might be 6'4". A lot of that is just perception because of the way he's had a career.

For the record, he's obviously taller than I am. I thought he was shorter than me, but as he kept playing, he kept going up, up, up. So he's not as small as maybe I thought five years ago, six years ago. The guy's got such a motor, such an attitude, and there's so much to be said for that.

I think that's his best attribute. When he's out there, he just goes hard, goes hard. I'm thinking about Kampman right now, Matthews is going in with him, and there's another guy who just went hard. Sometimes players outplay their size, outplay their dimensions, their measurables. We've done well with those guys.

Then him coming back last year, that was just -- it was a really good deal for us. Obviously I think it was a good deal for him. I'm glad he came to that decision. That was one he had to make for himself, and he did, and he conferred with his family and just thrilled he's back with us because he's a tremendous player, but a really strong team guy on top of it.

Q. Bret Bielema comes back to town. I know in 2021 he wasn't able to come because of COVID. He talked

yesterday at his press conference about the University of Iowa, your staff, yourself. What have you seen with what he's done at Illinois? Your thoughts from the outside looking in what he's doing. Then obviously someone you're very familiar with and have a lot of fondness with as well.

KIRK FERENTZ: Just talking about Joe Evans, who came as a walk-on, and Bret came as a walk-on, ends up being a captain, him and Mike Devlin in '92. That doesn't happen by accident. You don't fall into that. It's hard work. It's attitude, all those things. I think that's what we've seen in his career too.

I don't think any of us who know Bret from the late '80s, early '90s, or from the early part of his coaching career would really be surprised what he's done -- Wisconsin, Arkansas, now what he's doing at Illinois. He's always been serious about this. He's been inquisitive. He works really hard, just like he did as a player. Those things have carried over into his coaching career certainly.

Just happy for his success and hope he doesn't have any this weekend. After that, he can have at it, all for it.

Q. Some of the guys that are going to be taking part in that could come back next year. I know you tend to -- it's probably a December conversation, but what are those like, and how much do you -- some of it is NIL related these days too. How does that process work?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's -- you're right on everything you just said. There are numerous guys that are capable of coming back. I think this is the last year of the COVID derby. Anyway, so a couple guys have that option.

We'll talk to them about it and encourage them, but ultimately it's got to be their decision. I'll cite Riley Moss, not the same discussion, but it kind of is. He had a chance to come out after the Citrus Bowl, and I thought for sure he would. He chose to come back.

The one component to that, as I always tell the guys, don't come back if you want us to kiss your butt every day because we're not doing that. We're going to coach you and work with you like we have since you've been here.

I bring Riley up because kind of in the back of your mind you worry about that when a guy comes back. Is this guy looking for pats on the back every day and all that stuff? The thing I'm never forget, Riley was the first guy out there in the spring, just worked his tail off. He had an unbelievably good spring and then obviously had a great, great fall last year. So he used that year to his benefit.

Not everybody is going to go to the NFL, he did. But the reason you come back is to be at your best. Joe Evans, the same way. Joe, I think he wanted to be a captain. I think that was a goal of his. I couldn't guarantee it to him, but obviously the odds went up with Campbell and some of those guys graduating.

But as long as they're coming back for the right reasons, obviously we'd love to have them back, but we're not going to sell them. We're not going to try to pitch anything to them. Just hope they'd want to come back, but if they move on, we're with them on that too. You don't want guys on the team that aren't here heart and soul. It just doesn't work out very well.

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