

Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs. Tennessee
Camping World Stadium
Iowa Hawkeyes
Head Coach Kirk Ferentz
Press Conference
December 3, 2023

THE MODERATOR: We are looking forward to having Iowa face Tennessee in the Cheez-It Citrus Bowl on New Year's Day, 1:00 p.m., down here in Orlando, Camping World Stadium. It will be your second trip here in three years. We had you a couple years ago against Kentucky, we are looking forward to having the Iowa Hawkeyes fans back.

Coach, if you could start with an opening statement, that would be great and then we'll get to a few questions.

KIRK FERENTZ: Appreciate that.

First of all we're just excited to be playing another game. Really proud of our team. They worked hard all year. Disappointing loss last night but they certainly earned the right to play an outstanding Bowl like the Citrus Bowl. We are first and foremost, excited to be playing.

Secondly, very excited to be going back to Orlando. A lot of the guys on our team had that experience two years ago. For a lot of guys, it's going to be a new experience. And whether they have been there two years ago or the new guys this year, the one thing about is just it's a really tremendous Bowl game. First class experience on and off the field.

The committee down there does a wonderful job. It's a great city to host a game. Certainly the concept of being integrated into the community of Orlando I think is very unique when it comes to Bowl games, and it's something our players really enjoyed.

On top of that, it's going to be a great challenge on the field. We realize that. It was that way two years ago; it will be against Tennessee, as well. We're just excited to be playing and even better that we're playing on the 1 St. In the Citrus Bowl.

Q. This is maybe an odd time for this but I wanted to ask you about a play last night and that of Koen Entringer. I know in the Citrus Bowl two years ago, Cooper DeJean had a play similar where he raced across the field to tackle a running back or a receiver inside the five. Koen missed a tackle and ran 90 yards down the field to tackle a punt returner. Did you get a chance to see that, and what was kind of your impression, maybe if you did get a chance to check it out on video today or something.

KIRK FERENTZ: I have not looked at it yet but I was just talking to Phil about it two hours ago, so maybe you were tapping into our conversation. But kind of had the same thought.

You know, saw it on the field out there. Koen is one of our gunners. Missed the tackle. I know he feels bad about that. But for him to get out off the ground and chase the returner back down there, whatever it was, inside the 10-, 5-yard line, I had the same thought. It really is like a flashback to the Bowl, playing the Citrus Bowl where Cooper did just a great job.

I think it tells you a lot about a player. I can cite a player Bob Sanders made in 2003 against Michigan. Kind of similar. It just tells you that the guy plays start to finish, and Koen has been that way since he's been here. He's been a tremendous young guy, really great prospect, and played well for us this year on special teams. Excited about his future and again, tremendous attitude.

Q. With the transfer portal opening tomorrow, curious, what's your approach to that, and any lessons learned from last year when you were more active than you were in past years?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, yeah, first of all, just to comment on that, I think obviously this whole thing has progressed, and last year it made more sense to be active than the year before.

How will it go this year? It's hard to predict. A year ago at this time we had already met with our players. We met with them the week after Thanksgiving and just talked to each and every one about their futures, what they are thinking about, just so we had some indication of what our roster is going to shake out to be and just encouraged guys to take last week and this week to make a decision.

As you might imagine last week, that really wasn't appropriate to talk to players about what they were thinking. Our focus was solely on the Championship Game.

So we'll meet as a staff tomorrow morning and just talk jointly about the roster, and then we'll go through the process, again, touching base with all of our players through the next two days. Already had one player call and indicate he is going to enter the portal.

So all in all, I think what you want for every player is for them to be happy with their situations. You know, if a guy is not sure he wants to be here or sure he doesn't want to be here, then my encouragement would be to maybe check something else out. We operate better with guys who are really fully invested.

We'll do pretty much the same way as last year. Outside of we weren't able to utilize last week just to get some information but my guess is by the end of the week, we'll have a little bit better idea of what our roster is going to shape up like, and from then, we'll

have a better idea of how we can move forward, too, in terms of looking in the portal and seeing of what might be of interest to us.

Q. Did you get a chance to see who got in the College Football Playoff? Are you aware of what happened there?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I know who is in it. I don't know the politics or discussions. I know Florida State is not happy. I did catch that. But I don't know who the four teams are yet.

Q. I was just curious, I respect -- I think a lot of people respect your opinions on these things. You know, when a team does something on the field and then maybe it's not necessarily rewarded and that type of thing, do you think that's a dangerous precedent? Or do you have any thoughts, I guess, on kind of that aspect of college football, sort of passing an eye test versus what happened on the field?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, I think it's one of those ones, in this kind of situation, we're always going to have these discussions. There's no perfect way. It's kind of like a conference thing, unless you play a true Round Robin schedule, somebody is always going to complain about this team played that team in conference play. It's as old as, at least when I got here in '81, it was an issue then.

So long story short, I still -- I was telling my wife today, I'm still not sure we weren't better off just going to -- one rule, as a rule, if you go undefeated, you really help your chances. That wasn't true today. It wasn't true the year Auburn got left out.

But overall, it's hard for more than two teams to go undefeated. So I'm still of the opinion, you go two or you go, whatever, 12, 14, 16. And four has been okay, but again, there's no perfect system, and you know, whatever we do to enter the expansion year, which I think starts next year, that's going to bring some challenges, too.

You know, it gives everybody something to talk about, argue about, those kinds of things, and it is unfortunate that a team could go undefeated. Listening to the chatter, it sounds like you could make an argument for all six teams that were in the discussion, maybe more than that even.

It's tough. It's just one of those things, and we'll see what happened moving forward.

Q. Congratulations on the Bowl berth. Just have a question for you, I know last week against Nebraska, you made a pretty big decision in the second half to sub out Drew Stevens and go with Marshall Meeder, who had not seen the field for you guys yet and of course it worked out. As it relates to another position at quarterback, and I know you've been asked similar questions before, but Deacon has I think 11 interceptions and nine games played -- excuse me, 11 turnovers in nine games played, and he has a couple other fumbles that have been recovered by the offense. At what point do you take the same view with that position at quarterback as you do with kicker or DB at

times where you give another guy, a young guy a chance to perform or prove himself in a game when another guy is either struggling to perform or protect the football?

KIRK FERENTZ: Two separate discussions. Last week, it was clear Drew was not -- he wasn't himself. Two kickoffs out of bounds, really uncharacteristic for him. Uncharacteristic for any good kicker, which we consider Drew to be. He's a proven player, proven performer.

At that time I felt it was a momentary decision. It wasn't a decision for the season. If Drew kicked off last night, would have been there for field goals, PATs. So you know, that's one separate circumstance.

And Deacon's case, I think he's made a lot of progress, and last night was not an easy night. I don't know if you noticed the team we played was pretty salty on defense. They are a pretty good team. So you have to factor those things in.

The other thing you factor in, which is you know, both those situations are tied together. Marshall Meeder has been practicing really well. Since he's gotten here, he's practiced well all fall. He's behind a player who is proven and done a very, very nice job for us. He really didn't get an opportunity and when he did get an opportunity, came through.

Not surprised. Drew is still our starting kicker. In Deacon's case, we watch practice every day and we've watched it since the start of camp back in early August. Our decision as coaches is that Deacon gives us our best chance to play, and that's really how we operate over each and every position.

So you've just got to, I think, take into consideration his limited experience, and you know, the fact of the matter; the other two guys that are in the depth chart, three guys if you want to include Tommy Poholsky, none of them really have substantial experience either.

We watch them in practice every day. It's no knock on anybody in the race. It's just our feel that Deacon gives us our best chance, and that's where we're at.

Q. Just wondering what the value, I guess, of not only for older guys that are going to get to play in the Bowl game but to use that extra practice time to help younger guys get more experience and just your take on balancing those two sides of things.

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it's a great question. It really valuable, really important, and one thing I've always said but the most important thing about a Bowl game is the experience for the players, and it so happens, you know, we've been very fortunate.

My 34 years here, quite frankly, we've always had good opportunities to go to great Bowls in really nice venues. I can tell from you experience, going to Orlando, this is going to be our third trip overall, it's such a great place to host a Bowl. They do a wonderful

job, the committee, and a big part of the Bowl experience is what the committee does to set things up for the players. That's huge.

And you want the players to really enjoy it because they have earned the right to be there. That's still the concept of a Bowl game.

Second thing on the list in my mind is just it's an opportunity for us to be together for another month and operate as a team. It's a very different schedule than what it's been the last 14 weeks. A little more like a bye week schedule in some ways at this juncture.

It's just an opportunity for us to continue to operate as a team and that's the best part about sports. And then to break it down a little further, we are kind of on two tracks right now. The early part of the month, we really worked lightly with the older guys. They don't need to have shoulder pads or have contact for a couple weeks. Need them to kind of recharge a little bit and just get back to a refreshed mode, if you will.

But we'll get a chance to work the younger guys that haven't been playing on Saturdays and don't have that volume of work built up. For a program like us, when we lose a guy, and quarterback is a good position, we don't have guys stacked up that are five-star recruits or have three years of game experience.

So it's really important for us to be working as much in any opportunity we can on football and that's one nice thing about a Bowl game. It gives you a real opportunity to coach those younger guys, maybe guys that were on the look teams that we haven't been able to coach, gets hands-on with that type of thing during the course of a season.

It's a wonderful opportunity for everybody, and the whole idea for everybody in the program is try to improve daily. A guy like Jay Higgins will be doing the next couple weeks versus Ben Kueter, very different programs, but hopefully beneficial for both.

Q. I wanted to ask the team's mentality right now, the game ended 16, 17 hours ago, and I know the players said they were going to let this one sting a little longer than some of the normal games, but does today's news of getting to do go to a top-tier Bowl game like the Citrus Bowl, does that help the team move on a little bit, move forward and build excitement for the future rather than dwelling on what happened yesterday?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, that's a great point because every loss stings. If you're a competitor, that's the way it works. There's no substitute for winning. No substitute for losing. Two different extremes and one is a lot better than the other.

But typically, if you lose a game, you don't get good news on Sunday. And in this case, to your point, yeah, we've got wonderful news today. I don't want to speak for everybody but I think I can speak for everybody. Everybody should just be really excited about this.

Again, you go into Orlando, great Bowl committee that does a great job, great community. And you get to play a top tier opponent. It's a great challenge on that hand, great experience for our players.

We gave the guys a couple days off. We'll meet here in a couple mornings and be the first time we'll be together but I'm sure everybody will be really happy about that. We'll move our sights forward. We'll move on to the next one, the next challenge and try to be smart about the month. But yeah, great point.

Q. I'm sure you haven't looked at Tennessee very much but they run that -- offense, really wide split that Josh Heupel likes to run. How familiar will your guys be with that type of offense and what challenges do you think that will present?

KIRK FERENTZ: We certainly haven't seen them this year, but I know the work that Josh has done obviously at Tennessee and Central before that, just outstanding.

You know, we have coincidentally, we saw it on Tennessee the last two years against Kentucky. We played Kentucky two straight years. We do have some familiarity but certainly weren't looking at them from a game planning standpoint. Nice thing about playing on January 1 is we'll have plenty of time to look at them.

I'll go back to my first experience playing Tennessee. It was 1982 in the Peach Bowl, and one guy I remember, they had Reggie White, Mike Cofer, I believe is his name, outside linebacker, two pretty good players on defense then Cole Kent was their punter. Oh, my golf course, the sprinter was the receiver -- gosh.

Q. Willie Gault.

KIRK FERENTZ: Willie Gault, I'm sorry. It's embarrassing I couldn't pull that name up.

But some pretty good players. We had a great game with them. You know, you follow them through the years. Just really good program. So it's going to be a big challenge for us. We know that.

Q. I just wanted to ask you, you alluded to your schedule coming up. Do you anticipate practicing much this week or does that start a week from, say, tomorrow?

KIRK FERENTZ: We'll probably go real light Friday, Saturday. Just, I don't want the guys to go a couple weeks without, you know, getting on the field and doing some things. The older guys will be on and off the field; much like the bye week, and then we'll work the younger guys a little bit more.

Then we have our banquet here next Sunday and then we go into finals week, so we'll be very limited during finals week and then start pretty much in earnest after the last finals are over.

Q. I wanted to ask about the Tennessee up-tempo offense but you sort of answered that already. I'll ask about Parker and the Broyles Award one more time. I don't think you got a chance to speak to that. Given what happened last night about Michigan, I know you lost the game but held them to 213 yards. How would you grade the job that he did against that offense last night?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I think anybody watching the game as a football person will realize those are two really good defensive teams playing out there. You factor in, at least in my mind, you factor in how good Michigan has been offensively the last three years, so it's really impressive.

I thought our guys really competed, really competed hard obviously, did a good job up front. Guys in the back end did a really nice job, and it's just a good team effort. It definitely starts -- Phil and the staff did a great job putting the plan together and most importantly, the players really went out and competed. It all goes together.

Can't say enough about the job Phil has been, 25 years in this program, since 2012 as a coordinator, and to watch the growth, the improvement that we've seen in that regard, it's just -- it's really impressive. I'm thrilled he's going to the Broyles Award banquet, and I believe it's tomorrow, the next couple days.

All of the contestants there, I think there's five finalists. They are all excellent coaches.

But for Phil to be in that group is outstanding. It would be great if he won it. I know this that in terms of this building, everybody really appreciates the job Phil does, true professional, outstanding coach, and be really nice to see that recognized on a national basis.

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