

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

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Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: Good afternoon. Good to be back here. Certainly the bye week allowed us to rest some people, which was a good thing, and then also work some other guys, get them caught up a little bit. I think overall the week was beneficial for us, and we wrapped that up the end of last week and had the weekend off. Guys got back to it, and now we're ready to move forward here.

I think if you look back at the first half of the season, we've come out with a 4-2 record. Overall we made strides as a football team. A couple things we knew going into the season, we knew our veteran guys would have to play their best. I think for the most part we've seen that, and certainly a lot of newer players are going to have to step up, and we've seen that plus some additional guys, as well, that maybe we weren't counting on. I think for the most part we've done a good job. We've moved forward here a little bit and played good competition, combined I think the teams that we've played, somebody told me the record is 25-11. We've played a really competitive schedule. I believe overall the team has moved forward.

As we look forward right now, the team and the season, it's like putting a puzzle together. There are always parts of it that need to be put together, and things are always kind of changing, so that's kind of where we're at right now, and the big thing right now I think is taking what we learned in the first six weeks. Certainly the players have learned a lot. As coaches we've learned more about what our players are capable of doing, and hopefully we can be a little bit smarter moving forward, take better advantage of the players that we have, and try to match up against the people that we have to play the next six weeks, and that's the whole idea is to put yourself in position to win.

I think a couple things that we're going to have to do a little bit better are fairly obvious. We want to run the ball better, do a better job with ball security. I think we've done a pretty good job with takeaways. Certainly we'd like to continue that, and if we can add to that, perfect. It would be a good thing. Limiting explosive plays, big plays defensively. That's certainly paramount as it is in any team. And then the biggest thing is just continued better execution, sharper execution, more consistency. Those are the things that

give you a chance to win, and those are the things that keep you from losing. Really nothing too earth shaking.

That's where we're at right now, and now we turn our attention to Northwestern. That started yesterday. Typical of Northwestern, you pretty much know what to expect. They're a good football team, they've got good players. This is a veteran Northwestern team. They're very well-coached, play hard start to finish, and like you'd expect, it's going to be a 60-minute ballgame. As we move in, that's where our sights are right now.

A couple players certainly worth mentioning, their quarterback has really matured into an outstanding football player. He's a top-notch guy and has done a really good job. And then the running back not only has made history and Northwestern history as a running back but also Big Ten history. He's one of the best backs to play in our conference, and I think all of us saw he was a little bit slowed up it looked like earlier in the season, but saw Saturday the kind of back he is and what he's capable of doing. Sounds like just a tremendous young man beyond that. From that standpoint, we've got a big challenge on our hand, and we'll continue our preparation getting ready for Northwestern.

Captains this week are Josey Jewell, Matt VandeBerg, Sean Welsh and Kevin Ward. And then just on the injury front, not a lot to report other than James Butler got to practice today. It's the first day back for him. So medically things are looking good that way, now the big thing is to get him back in shape. He's missed significant time, football time, and really couldn't run full-speed with that elbow issue, and then the other trick is just getting used brace, so he's got a ways to go yet, but it was just good to get him back on the field and back with our football team.

Q. How long do you anticipate it's going to take to get him back into game shape?

KIRK FERENTZ: It won't be this week for sure, but it's just good to get him back in football movements a little bit and doing some things. We'll have to try to get him back into football shape, football speed, and like I said, go through the adjustment. But he's eager and willing to get going.

Q. Isn't that awfully difficult for a running back, an elbow? Not that a defensive lineman wouldn't necessarily need an elbow, but if you're tucking the ball and get hit on the elbow or you fumble and you're just not strong enough to carry the ball the way you did before?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, we're going to find out. I've never gone through this to my recollection. We've had linemen with elbow issues, that type of thing, but I can't remember one of these. We'll just have to play it by ear, but the good news is he's been cleared medically, everything healed up the way it should, and it's good to get him back on the field.

Q. You mentioned the running game; is that a point of emphasis during the bye week, trying to find a way to get those yards per carry up?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, really it's a program point of emphasis. It's something we try to do a good job of and pride ourselves on. We're not where we want to be for a lot of reasons right now, and it's like a lot of the things that I've touched on, ball security, better tackling, all those things are just the result of doing a little bit better job in practice, being a little bit more consistent, and ultimately it gets down to technique and concentration. That's really what it gets down to, and then doing it in tough circumstances.

But I think we've done some good things. Certainly the last game I thought we ran the ball better, looked a little bit more like what we'd hoped to look like. Hopefully we made some strides over the last week and hopefully we'll continue to do so this week.

Q. One of the things Brian said last week was he wants to make sure you guys don't use Akrum too much to keep him fresh. How do you ensure that happens?

KIRK FERENTZ: Really it's like a pitch count in baseball. When you get into a game, you have to do what it takes to win that football game. In our planning we're always trying to keep in mind how many times we'd like him to be involved, be it in the run game or pass game, and you never know how a game is going to go. Run game is dictated pretty much by us but not totally. Pass game is a little bit different.

But yeah, just being cognizant of that, and then also knowing that we're going to rotate guys during the course of the game. We have to have a schedule or a tentative plan for that and then stick to that.

Q. Is there a number of touches you go, okay once he gets this many, next week coming back --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, whatever that range would be, 18 to 25 probably, somewhere in that ballpark. Every game is probably going to be a little bit different, but

we're just going to have to be mindful of that as we go through the next six weeks.

Q. Did Ivory or Toren do anything during the off week to just show that they can carry --

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, they both looked better than they did a week ago. The good thing about young players, and we've got a lot of young players playing right now, if they practice well, if their mind is in the right place, they can improve a little bit more dramatically than a fifth-year guy or fourth-year guy that's played a lot. That's something we're banking on. Just like our veterans have to play their best football, if our younger guys don't keep coming on and keep improving and show some benefit from the play they've had in the first half of the season, we're not going to be a real good football team. For us it's all about everybody pushing forward right now, and to your point, hopefully both those guys will be a little bit more better ready now to go out and compete.

Q. What does the offense need to do to get off to a quicker start?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, it's funny how some of those things are all related, tied together. You think about two of our turnovers in the red zone, if you want to look at our red zone production, we've had three turnovers, I believe, and two of them came in opening drives. So right there in itself, issues are interconnected sometimes. So not turning the ball over. First series of the last game we played and the first series, I believe, North Texas, same thing. We drive the ball down there, whatever it was, 80 yards, and then turn it over in the end zone.

A lot of times these things are kind of interrelated, just good fundamental football play. If we do a little bit better job in that area, it'll help our red zone production, it'll help the ball security issues, help opening series, all those kinds of things linked together.

Q. With the way college football has kind of spread out now, is it tougher to stop the run than it used to be, game planning against the run?

KIRK FERENTZ: I guess I look at it, to me it's a little bit more like the days of option football because so many people are running their quarterbacks now, so that makes it a little bit different dimension. Yeah, football keeps evolving, but it all comes back to something that you've seen before, I guess, in some ways. But yeah, it's almost ironic that the run game is a little bit more prominent now in football, in terms of yardage, but it's not maybe the run game people would have thought of 20 years ago, that type of deal.

Things just keep rolling around. It's all part of the game.

Q. You mentioned at the outset that the yards per carry you're giving up is a lot higher than you're used to?

KIRK FERENTZ: It is, and quite frankly right now what we'd like to do is reverse them. Where we're at offensively and where we're at defensively, if we could flip-flop them. That may be tough to do over the next six weeks, but hopefully for the next six weeks if we look at those numbers just in a six-week basis, maybe we can get to flip those around. Exactly right, the yards per carry part is something that we're very cognizant of.

Q. You were on the short list for Clayton Thorson, one of the two or three teams at the very end. What was his recruitment like, and has he progressed the way that you expected him to progress?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it wasn't like we discovered anything there. He was a really good football player in high school, and it was very obvious, very apparent. So he really stood out in our minds as a top prospect, tremendous young man, tremendous family. So check all the boxes there, just an outstanding young man, and unfortunately we came up short.

What he's doing right now is not a surprise to us. We really thought he was a top-rate quarterback prospect. I think we've all seen him develop with each step of the way. He's certainly a much better player today than 2015, and that's what you'd expect.

Q. Did you think you had an in there because of Chuck Long's high school and everything?

KIRK FERENTZ: We were in the hunt and that's all you can hope to do. For me, recruiting, what it all comes down to is you just hope a prospect will really look into your school, investigate the school, investigate the program, the people, all those kinds of things, and invest some time and really get to know the people in the program. Any prospect that does that, there's nothing more you can ask. You're going to win some, you're going to lose some unfortunately, but if a prospect does that, which he did, all we can do is be appreciative. We're a fan of his other than this Saturday or last year we played them, that kind of thing. We're trying to put him on the ground or block his passes, all that stuff. But he's a tremendous kid. There are a lot of guys like that in the league, just a lot of good people, and the running back, the same thing. He's a really good player, too, and tremendous young man.

Q. Didn't you actively recruit Justin Jackson, too?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, we tried. That's another swing and a miss. That's two strikes right there. We'll leave it

right there. He's a tremendous young man. Again, that was no big secret. He was a really good player and just kept on going.

Q. Defensive pressure, have you assessed that up until now, and is that a point of emphasis?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's never as good as you want. You know, the whole thing is about disruption in my mind. If you can disrupt -- just keep them from sitting back and doing what they want to do at all times. But you know, a lot of the passing game is kind of like the running game. It's tough to get quarterback sacks because the ball comes out so quickly and the bubble screens and all that stuff. And it's all relative, but in certain circumstances you don't want to just let a guy stand back there and pick out receivers, that type of thing, and be comfortable. If you can make them a little bit edgy, disrupt the pocket, that type of thing, that's not as good as a sack, but it serves a purpose if you can get that. We'll probably never be happy with that, either, just like the yards per carry.

Q. Do you think Boone Myers will play this week? And also what about Manny Rugamba?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're both back working, so we'll see. We'll see how it goes. They're making progress.

Q. You listed an OR at the strong safety at this point on the depth chart. Any insight there?

KIRK FERENTZ: All the guys have experience back there and probably good experience, so we'll just probably kind of play it right through the week, see what it looks like on Saturday, and it'll probably be that way all season long until this thing settles right now. The good news is I think all the guys have done a pretty good job back there.

Q. When you look at your freshman wide receivers, Brian said that they have worked their way up into playing territory, passed some guys who have experience. What have you seen from them? They're all different but they've all seemed to grow at a similar rate.

KIRK FERENTZ: They're very different, every one of them, at least the three that are playing right now. They all bring a little different something to the table, if you will, and I think the big thing, the common denominator is they came here, and it's well-documented, it was a land of opportunity to come here this August and start camp with us. I made reference, we're hardly the team we were back in January, certainly not the team in April or August. You know, a big part of that is the receiving game. We had a hard time in the spring throwing the football, we expected that, and the good news is I think we're on the right path right now. Those three guys are doing a good job, certainly Nick Easley, a newcomer, the best thing he's

done in my opinion is playing live football. Not that he wasn't a good practice guy, but in the spring he was just trying to feel his way, and now you really see him taking off and doing some good things. Matt is back healthy, plus our tight ends are doing a good job in the passing game.

Just a combination of all that has given us a chance to at least throw the ball a little bit and have a representative pass offense.

Q. You've thrown a lot of guys out there who are true freshmen in the last several years almost just hoping or trying to get, whether it was Jerminic Smith or whoever, Adrian Falconer, Devonte Young. What makes these guys better, and were you ever reluctant to throw them out there, like a Max Cooper, why him over say just play Devonte Young and redshirt him?

KIRK FERENTZ: Because Max has done a good job in practice. He's not as big or strong as we'd like right now. He'll be much more mature two years from now, but he's starting off good out in practice, competing against our guys, where we thought he could maybe make contributions to help our football team. That's really the opinion or the eye we've tried to have with every position. If we feel a guy can compete better than the guys that he's competing with, we're going to put him in there.

Those guys have just taken advantage of their opportunity. Again, they're very different players, all three of them, but they've done enough good things to show us at least they can help us win this year, and that's what we're focused on, plus it will help them as they go along, too. If we didn't think they could handle it, then we'd keep a redshirt on them. That's kind of the decision you end up making.

Q. Northwestern has been known to use their grass as a home-field advantage. You've obviously played there quite a few times. How do you simulate that, not knowing what it's going to be like?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's really no big deal. I think this is our third grass game. The good news is that the grass surfaces we play on are really good grass surfaces. It's not a big factor. I don't see it being any impact on the game, unless you get into rain and mud, that kind of stuff. I don't think that's predicted right now.

Q. Josey Jewell, how much does his physicality play into his game?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's a big part of being a linebacker typically. Most linebackers are of that nature. It's hard to avoid it when you're a linebacker. The biggest thing I'd start with is just his mentality, just his focus, the

serious nature that he does things and competes at. He's just a very tenacious guy, very determined, very focused guy. He's got good physical tools. It's unusual when you see a guy go tackle somebody. It doesn't happen a lot where guys do it consistently, and he's got that ability, so it's a real credit to him.

Q. How much have you guys discussed what else is there to say about the first six games, and how much did you talk about that during the off week?

KIRK FERENTZ: You know, it's important. I think we're probably more focused on the ball security, the yards per carry. But like I was pointing out earlier, most of this stuff just really ties together. I've said several times, we've probably done more ball security work and maybe we are screwing this up. Maybe I'm starting to wonder about it. But it's just you keep emphasizing things, and at some point you gain traction on it or you don't, and if you don't, you're going to have a problem. So I do know this: We're finally at the break-even point. We've hit even on the turnover-takeaway ratio, which is acceptable, but it's not what we're looking for. Historically for the most part if we're going to have a successful team, we've got to build on that. So we've got to keep taking it away, and we've got to do a better job protecting it, and doing that will help some other areas, too. It all kind of flows together.

Q. Two years ago at Northwestern, was that kind of the first moment where you thought we might have something here with Akrum, when he had kind of his breakout game?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it was the first time he looked like he got it. He always showed flashes of ability prior to that. I guess it must have been '14 he had a couple runs at the end, something like that, so he's always had the ability to slip and slide, but just protecting the football and realizing that's part of the game, too. And it wasn't anything intentional or anything he was trying to tick us off, it was just where he was at at that point. But that's a real important point of the game if you're a running back, a receiver, a quarterback, you've got to realize that ball security is really important if you're a returner. It's just part of the game. It's one more thing that gets emphasized in college football, and if you move on to pro football, teams are a little bit more adept at trying to knock it out, and they're going to hit you a little harder than you got hit three years before that, so you just learn how to do a better job.

But yeah, that was the first day where I think he really understood we needed him because we were pretty much out of options at that point, and I think he got that, and he really played like a varsity player that day. It was really a good performance, and boy, did we need it.

Q. Akrum said today he felt like maybe that was his last chance, that if things didn't go well --

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, that's a pretty extreme -- we weren't going to make him walk home or anything like that, but at some point, it's like everybody, at some point teams have to do this and players have to do this, you have to show that, hey, I'm starting to get this a little bit, and you can count on me, one of those kinds of things. That's part of a player's job, quite frankly, is to show to their teammates and to show the coaching staff that, hey, I can do this, you can count on me, and I'm not talking about getting beat. Guys get beat all the time because we play good players and good teams. But as far as the things like reliability, being on time, all those little things that a lot of people to develop trust, those are the things that players have to do, and they've got to demonstrate that. When they do that, they start becoming a good teammate, everybody feels like, hey, we can count on him to go in. We know he's going to give his best, he's really going to be focused on and give his best, and that's all you can ask.

Q. Where do you think Coach O'Keefe has helped the most in Nate's development?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of levels, and that's the story of coaching, quite frankly. It starts with the fundamental understanding and basis. I don't care if you're talking about coaches, the best teachers I've been around, the best coaches I've been around, I'm talking about educators, I'm thinking more high school level because I never taught at the college level, but the best teachers I've been around, the best coaches at all levels, they really know how to make complex things a little bit more easy to understand. They're not trying to impress you how smart they are, they just try to convey knowledge and information and wisdom to you, and Ken has got a really great skill or great ability to do that.

So it starts with that. But then beyond that, especially with quarterbacks, it's a really hard and demanding position. I continue to be amazed how much information they have to process and all the things they're responsible for. So that part of it, you know, getting that information across, but more importantly, dealing with the responsibility that a quarterback has to go through. So you know, you're working a mind there, too, not just sharing information but working a mind and trying to get the guys through the highs and lows, and you can imagine some of the lows that Nate has had. He's had some lows already early in his career in six weeks.

But it's been really impressive how he's persevered and how he has an ability to flush things and move on. A big part of that's Nate, just the way he's wired, but also I think Ken has helped him a lot that way. I think Ken and our entire staff, too. It's really no different than

Norm Parker and Carl Jackson 19 years ago, two guys that were veteran coaches that had been through all the ups and downs that you go through in coaching to have those guys just help with the rest of the staff when things aren't going so well, that's really important, too.

Ken has added an awful lot. We're really happy to have him back there.

Q. Northwestern has always been so interesting because there's an intensity there that would qualify it, if you will, as a trophy-type game but there's none involved; however, it seems like there's an importance placed upon it no matter what the records are. Obviously it's so much more different than what it was when you were here the first time around, but how has it been for you to coach in this series for almost 20 years?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, our league is so different than it was in the '80s in some records. Some things haven't changed. Ohio State is still Ohio State, and you've got to go back, I think, to 1900 to get it the other way. So that's been pretty constant. But it wasn't a series in the '80s quite frankly, but the league isn't like that anymore. Our league isn't like that, and I can just go back to 19 years ago, I can't remember if it was the last play of the game, but it felt like it, when they ran the option in there for a touchdown, they beat us by one point or whatever. But I remember it went right down to the wire, and it was an option, I believe, to the offense's right, defense's left, and boom, that was it. It was a bad feeling.

The games have gone back and forth, they've been hard-fought. There's been a couple that have gone either way, but for the most part they've gone right down to the wire.

I guess for me, my modern-day Northwestern experience is Randy Walker, who was a tremendous coach, tremendous person, and now you've got Pat, who was an outstanding player at Northwestern. That's his school, and now he's running the program, coaching the team. He and his staff have done a great job. They're very stable, they're very consistent. They're sound and they play hard, everything a football team should do.

We know we're going to have a real challenge on our hand, and there's been ups and downs, but typically it goes right down to the last series, last play, that type of deal.