

Cheez-It Citrus Bowl: Iowa vs Tennessee

Friday, December 29, 2023

Orlando, Florida, USA

Camping World Stadium

Iowa Hawkeyes

Brian Ferentz

Logan Jones

Press Conference



dialogue leading up to the decision that Beth made? In terms of were there conversations ahead of time? How did you find out? What was the process of that?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I would direct those questions to Beth. Like I said, my focus has been on our football team and our players and doing my job and getting them ready to play football games and try to help them be in position to be successful and win games. That is where I kept my focus during the season. That is where I have kept my focus since October, and that is where I intend to keep my focus for the coming days.

Q. Kirk talked yesterday about how he just appreciated everything you've put into the program. What does it mean for you to finish it out with him here in Orlando? I know it seemed to be emotional, too, at the Illinois game walking out of Kinnick with a win, and wondering how special that was to you and what it would mean to win this game?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think the emotion of the Illinois game was quite simply that these guys, these players. They set a goal at the beginning of the season, and that was to win the Big Ten. Unfortunately, we came up short in that regard.

The best we could do at the time was win the Big Ten West and give ourselves a chance to do that. In order to do that, we needed to beat Illinois, and we won that game. I think the emotion that you saw with everyone on the sideline, you saw a bunch of players that worked really hard and accomplished their goals.

Quite frankly, probably what I resent the most about this situation is that the focus has come off of our football players, who have really accomplished some tremendous things this year. It has gone on to things that just quite simply do not matter. They are trivial and silly in my opinion.

For whatever reason, the focus has gone there instead of on a bunch of players who have worked really hard, overcome a lot of adversity and dealt with a lot of nonsense to win 10 football games and put themselves in a

BRIAN FERENTZ: It is good to be here this morning, and just want to start by saying how excited we are to be down here in Orlando for this game. We were here two years ago and just have to say what a tremendous job this Bowl committee does in really kind of going out of their way to make us feel welcome and take care of us from the top to the bottom.

We were excited to come back down here. Excited to play Tennessee, obviously, a really good opponent. I know Coach Banks, going back to his time at Illinois, so I have some experience with their defensive system and what they do.

Excited for that challenge. I think the players have been working hard, had a good month of preparation. Like I said, we are excited to be here and get going.

Q. I guess I want to ask you, what have the last two months been like for you coaching? How have you been able to compartmentalize your future versus the task at hand, and how challenging was it in the beginning and how challenging is it potentially today?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think the answer is very simple, right. I made a commitment to this football team and to this football program. Like I said in my statement, I intended to honor that commitment. I feel like I have done that. I fully anticipate doing that for the next three, four days, whatever it is, and then cross the other bridge when I get there.

This place is important to me. University of Iowa is important to me. Football program is important to me. It is always important that I finish the right way and do my job.

Q. Going back to October, was it something that you were anticipating? Was there dialogue? What was the



position to win the 11th, which I think would be the fourth time in the history of the school that that's happened.

Quite frankly, I think that is where the focus should be. That is where I would like it to be. I cannot control what you guys do or what other people say, but I think we are really missing something that is pretty special that is going on.

Q. Is there a sense in the team. Is there a sense among the guys, especially on the offensive side, to win one for Brian Ferentz?

LOGAN JONES: I would not say our goal is to win it for Brian. Our goal is to win it for our team. That is what we came here to do. We have a great opportunity to do that against a great Tennessee team.

Obviously, it is going to be emotional. You get to play for a guy like Coach Brian, it means a lot. You get a guy who will stop by and say hi to your mom, have a conversation with her, and she will come to me after the game and say how much that means to her.

You get a guy like Coach Brian that comes in and does that, just the type of man he is, it means a lot to me. It means a lot to my mom, too. he does it with every player on the offensive, defensive side of the ball.

Yeah, it says a lot about him, and I think it is going to be a very emotional game for us, and we are going to go out there and try and play our best football.

Q. When you look at Tennessee, specifically James Pearce, what stands out about what he gets done?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I will let Logan start.

LOGAN JONES: You look at these guys, they are in the SEC. They have a lot of talent. They are a talented group. We are going to do our best to go out there and try and play our best football, because we have yet to do so, and that is our goal.

They are big, strong, talented guys, probably five-star guys, right. We do not have guys like that. It is just a great opportunity for our guys up front, our offense, to go out there and, like I said, just try and play our best football.

BRIAN FERENTZ: I will piggyback off that and just talk about their whole defense, right. Everything for them starts with their front, with those big guys. I think our league has changed a little bit. We have seen some more defenses like that as time has gone on with some bigger guys up front, especially in the interior.

I think what makes these guys interesting is they have got the big guys up front. They have got the two backers that are pretty good players. Then, they are playing with those DBs, and they can be a little bit fluid with what they are showing you.

I think a real testament to them is just structurally, and I mean this as a huge compliment, they change week-to-week. They can present different looks, based on the game, based on the team they are playing. They can choose to play a couple different ways. They can change the front, they can change the coverage structure. They are really fluid in those things, and they do a nice job of it. They can really create some challenges with you for the pictures you are seeing up front or in the back end with the coverage.

I think one of the big challenges for us this week is going to be trying to identify very early on what their game plan is against us, because I think it will look different than maybe what we have seen on tape week-to-week. There is, obviously, going to be elements of it, but this has been a tough preparation, because you cannot just say, hey -- it is not like playing our defense where it's like, hey, this is what they are going to do.

We know that. They are going to match it up against what we are, but it is going to look like this on game day. Now we have to beat it.

There is an element of, hey, look, these guys have some really good players, but there is a structural component that is a little bit of a question mark right now. We probably will not know until about eight, nine, ten plays in this first quarter exactly what it is going to look like and make sure we are dialed in and seeing those pictures clearly and attacking them the way we want to attack them.

Q. Specifically with this game, how much does this mean? How much would a mean win considering this is your last game at a place you have spent a lot of hours in?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I would just go back to Tom's question. I think that narrative is ridiculous. Like I told you, if I have shared one thing with these players in my time here, I think that this program is not about one person. It never has been and it never will be, right.

I just feel fortunate that I have been a part of this place and I have been around the people that I have been around and had a chance to work with those people on a day-to-day and coach players like Logan and a lot of players that came before him.

It is not about one game. It is not about winning it for anybody. It is about doing things right and doing it for Iowa football. That is where my focus is going to stay on Monday.

Q. A question for you, you've had the opportunity to coach with your dad for over a decade here at Iowa. What has that meant to you, and what are your memories that you'll share moving forward?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah I think it is special that I have gotten to coach with my father. I have gotten to know him professionally, right. I think growing up, you see your parents as -- I do not know what the right word is, they are your parents, they are not real people. They do not have emotions. They do not have feelings. They do not have bad days. They do not have good days. They do not have hopes and dreams. They just have you. It is mom and dad.

Then as you get older, you meet your parents as people, and, obviously, I think everyone has that opportunity for the most part. Sometimes what you find maybe does not live up to maybe what your idea of what your parents was, right, because you see them as actual human beings, and we are all flawed.

I had a chance to get to know my father professionally, which I do not know that every son does, and that has been pretty special. He has lived up to everything that I imagined him to be. So I have enjoyed every minute of working with him. I do not know specific memories or anything like that. I will remember my time fondly. It was a lot of fun.

Q. I did want to ask about the challenges of working through this season, not personally, but professionally, when you bring in a quarterback as talented as Cade McNamara and he has an ACL and two NFL-caliber tight ends and they go out with season-ending injuries, and in the front you had to deal with a lot of ups and downs, and even in the backfield you had several running backs out early in the season, and you managed to persevere and have won games. What kind of challenge has that put on you and your players to try to execute when you know you're limited, and there's a reason why some players are first team and some are second team.

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think that is part of football. I think it was you that asked me a question this summer about dealing with adversity. If you do not expect adversity to happen, I do not -- I just think you are a fool.

We knew there were going to be challenges. You do not know exactly what they are going to be. You do not know

how many there will be. Sometimes you do not deal with as many. If you do not deal with any, then terrific, great. It is smooth sailing.

Those things are going to happen. One thing that I know in my experience is that the games will still get played. They will still get kicked off at that scheduled time. There is certainly too much money and media attention on those things to not get played.

You have to find a way to be competitive and try to win football games. That is the ultimate goal. In my estimation, I think it really comes down to the players and how they respond. We have been fortunate, but it starts with leadership. Starts with guys like Logan, who unfortunately did miss some time, but I am here to tell you, he played a lot, too, when he was not feeling great.

When you have that going on in your team, you have selfless guys that are willing to do whatever it takes to help the football team win and put the team first, then it is just a lot of fun.

Dealing with those challenges, I think that is the fun part of coaching. Every week you have to figure out what do we have available, what are we going against, and how do we give our football team the best opportunity to win the game. Then you see if you can go out there and do that on Saturday.

Sometimes it goes your way. Sometimes it does not, but I think if you do things the right way, you are probably going to win more than you lose, and I feel like we have done that for quite a long time at the University of Iowa.

Q. What would it mean for this program to win this game? 2022 against Kentucky, you guys came up a little bit short. To win this year with an 11th win, what would that mean for you and this program in a big Bowl game here?

LOGAN JONES: Like Coach Brian talked about, we have an opportunity to get our 11th win, which is I think the fourth time in program history.

Just to be a part of a team like that I think is something special, too, especially with all the adversity and the guys that have not been able to go out there and compete. You have guys like Luke Lachey, Erick All, Cade McNamara, who worked so hard in the off-season, gave their all just to play this season, and they will not have that opportunity now.

We do have that opportunity for the guys that are healthy to go out there and play and get an 11th win. To get that



11th win for Coach Ferentz, too, would be really cool, because it has only happened four times.

I think this game, it is a great opportunity for us to go out there and try and play our best football and get that 11th win.

Q. Thanks for all the time you gave us over the years. I appreciate that. Looked like Marco maybe elevated to No. 2 at some point, maybe at Northwestern game. What went into that decision, and any chance we might see him outside of an injury or performance on Monday, a package of plays or anything like that?

BRIAN FERENTZ: No look, we are going to make decisions every week we feel like are best for the football team. I felt like Marco had elevated above Joe at that time. We want to invest the reps in the guys that we think can help the football team win. That is why we made that decision.

Deacon is the starting quarterback. Deacon has played really good football for us. Deacon has led this football team to a lot of wins, and we expect Deacon to go the distance on Monday.

Q. You talked about you played center, guard, offensive line. It's a difficult transition to jump over from the defensive front to the offensive front, let alone play center, make the calls. Talk about Logan's development the last two years. And then, Logan, transitionally, what's been the most -- the biggest challenge for you, despite -- other than staying healthy?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I will start that. I will let you finish.

When you are evaluating players, you are always evaluating traits. When you talk about the center position, especially at the University of Iowa and you just think about the run of guys that we've had, going back, I mean, you can go back all the way.

If you want to talk about since 2012, you have my brother and then that transitions over, Austin Blythe becomes that guy, goes on to a really good NFL career. I would not call my brother's NFL career good but it was long -- is long.

You have Austin, then you just keep transitioning. Keegan Render played really good football for us. James Daniels at times played really good football for us at the center position. Then, you get to Tyler Linderbaum having a tremendous career. He looked pretty good the other night.

Then, you are always looking for that next guy. At one

time, it was always those guys. What are the traits you are looking for? You are looking for a guy that, number one, is tough. Tough and competitive. Just the type of person that hates losing maybe a little bit more than they enjoy winning. Somebody who is tough to the point of willing to do anything physically to play the game of football.

Then athleticism is, obviously, really important, but intelligence and leadership, those things, are critical at the center position.

As Tyler's time is winding down, we are looking at our roster and just did not feel like maybe that guy was in the offensive line room at that time. But, kept looking at this guy playing defensive line, and, boy, it sure seemed like he had all those things in a very similar manner to Linderbaum early in his career. We waited a little bit longer to switch Logan.

It seemed so obvious. So transition over to -- that was Bowl prep, right, when we started? Or was it spring? We got him going in the off-season.

What I can't say enough about Logan is I don't think people understand how difficult what he did last season was. To go from being a first-time offensive lineman in center in spring ball to going the distance starting 13 games for us at the position and really playing pretty well. Also watching him play that year and seeing a lot of really bright spots and a lot of really good things and getting excited knowing that his best football was in front of him.

He has done that. He has continued to grow as a football player, as a leader. It is all those things. The greatest compliment I can give him is I do not know that we have a football player on offense who works harder, who practices harder, who is tougher, who is more committed to the football team.

Logan is not always the most vocal player on our football team, but I think his example shines on a daily basis. When you have somebody like that playing that position, it really elevates the guys around him.

Ultimately, that is what you are looking for out of that player. I think the best centers that I have been around, they are guys that -- the four or five guys playing around him. Sometimes even at tight end position, a lot of times the quarterback, also, they play a little bit better when that guy is in the game. I think that is true about Logan. He has been a joy to coach.

I would just finish with this. I think his best football is still in front of him, and I am excited to see that. I will be watching carefully.



LOGAN JONES: You asked about the transition. Obviously, Coach Ferentz came and talked to me right away, and I was like, yeah, I will do it. I knew Tyler did it, but he gave me a week to think about it. Tyler and everything, and I was like, absolutely this is what I want to do.

It was a great challenge for me last year. There were some ugly plays, but that is part of it. It was an opportunity for me to grow. I think that is just the hardest thing, realizing you want them to be perfect, and that is just part of the game. It is an imperfect game. You are never going to go out there and be perfect. That is just unrealistic.

We always talk about in the O-Line room, and Coach Barnett always says: Do not be a flincher. Do not be a guy that shies away from challenges. That kind of defines who you are as a man. Are you going to take it head on, or are you going to shy away?

That was probably just the hardest thing for me initially, is just going towards the challenge and realizing you are going to get beat. You might give up a sack. You might give up penetration here or there, but just realizing that is part of the game. Everybody does it at some point in their careers. They are just learning from those mistakes and going through those obstacles.

I think the really cool thing is you've got four other guys on that offensive line who I consider my best friends. I have to go out there every single day and practice with them, and they are pushing me, and I am pushing them.

It is like a give-give thing, and it is just really cool to see the development of the guys in the line room. They push me, and they have made me a better player on the offensive line.

We have everybody coming back. I am really excited for this room and this team and what is next for us.

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Iowa Hawkeyes

Phil Parker

Jay Higgins

Press Conference



PHIL PARKER: Thank you, guys, for being here. Obviously I know you guys watched the game last night, Oklahoma, right? Oklahoma and what was it, Arizona, so I'm glad you guys made it up because I finished watching it, and I said, 'Boy, I got a press conference tomorrow.'

I welcome you guys here. It's a pleasure to come back here. I think I've been here a couple times and the hospitality has been really good. The fans are starting to come in from Iowa, so that's good.

The thing that we are looking forward to is a chance for our kids to go out here and have an opportunity to compete together, probably for the last time with this team put together.

So I think I've been really pleased how they have handled themselves this whole career and how they have been playing and stuck together as a unit. They are playing good and at a high level. The most important thing we are trying to get our guys to do is improve in football and grow as a player and grow as a person. I think our guys are doing a really good job of that; so I'm looking forward.

About Tennessee, obviously they are well-coached and they are a very talented team. You talk about looking at different things that go on in college football right now, obviously they have some guys, everybody gets in the portal, but if you watched the Kansas State game, there was a young guy in there who was a quarterback that played really well and obviously there was a young quarterback last night playing pretty well.

So that's going to be very interesting and it's going to be challenging for us just based on what I think they have, and they are a talented team. They are 8-4. They have done a good job and I really have a lot of respect for their coach.

Q. Jay, I wanted to ask you about making your decision, what went into it, and now are you kind of transitioning into maybe your future career as trying to be a recruiter for some of your teammates to come back with you?

JAY HIGGINS: Definitely. You know, over the last four years, I built a great relationship with obviously my teammates, and obviously the coaching staff that the University of Iowa has. Just the environment that puts the players first; I felt like if I came back another year, I could be a better football player.

You know, having Coach Parker, having Coach Wallace being the two guys I spend most of my time with, I felt like that was an easy decision for me, really, to make any decision on. Just like improving my game and doing things that I feel I can get better at.

Q. What's your recruiting pitch to Nick and all the others to try to get them to do the same?

JAY HIGGINS: I'm working on trying to recruit some guys who have got some degrees. So telling them that the photo shoot and coming to tour Kinnick Stadium is kind of out of the picture.

But just giving those guys space. Understanding that this decision is going to impact the rest of their life, and just allow them to ask their family what they are thinking. But I told them, you know, the standard is going to stay the same. If those guys stay or leave, they are always welcome with open arms. It will be fun to go out there and play football with some of my best friends for one more year.

Q. You mentioned the challenge of facing a new quarterback. What do you know about Nico Iamaleava, and what do you expect from Tennessee's offense with that change at quarterback?

PHIL PARKER: Well, I don't think the offense is going to change. It's been very similar to what he's done in the past. But I think we have about 54 snaps on him. They

are running the same offense but he is a little bit different in style. Probably runs maybe a little bit better. I'm sure they have got some other things up their sleeve of what they want to do with them.

But it's going to be a challenge for us and we are going to be have to be able to match their talent outside with the wide receivers they have and the ability to stop the run.

I think that's the most important thing that we have to do in any game. You have to make sure you stop the run and try to make them pass it, which, you know, they have a lot of explosive plays and one of our goals is making sure that we don't give up explosive plays. So it's definitely a challenge in that way.

Q. 13.2 points per game is lowest Iowa has allowed since 2008. Where does this defense stack up among some of the best unit you've had in your time in Iowa City?

PHIL PARKER: It's up there pretty high. Any time you're only giving up 13 points a game or 13.2, whatever it is, I just think every team is different, and the character of this team and the bond that I think the coaches have with the players has been second-to-none. It's really been good.

It's like it runs itself a little bit. We have meetings there, back in the office and they get out of meetings, they grab their dinners and they are back in the meeting rooms with themselves and kick us out, you know what I mean.

Really pleased the way Jay has been a great leader for us. I know he's blossomed and he has a lot more to do, and obviously I'm happy that we have him back and we better get some other guys back, too, or we're going to be on you again.

Q. You said it all starts with the run for Tennessee. What do you know about Dylan Sampson and what makes him so dynamic?

PHIL PARKER: Well, I tell you what, you look at all their backs, they are very similar. With the way he's able to find the holes and the way they spread you out and they try to get you in a light box. To me, I was looking at all the backs that they have, and I know they are not going to be with a couple guys right now. But No. 23 has done a good job and he's been in there, too. It's going to be interesting to see how it plays out here, but I still think that they are going to want to run the ball if you have a light box. It's going to be a challenge. He's an elusive back and I think he's just as good as the other guys.

Q. I guess when you look at how you guys have

performed for more than a couple of decades, and Phil, there's been a lot of focus on you winning the Broyles, but also some of the assistants KB, Seth and the way you guys put together a game plan and coach at all three levels what do they mean for the program, those assistants, and how have you seen them maybe grow from really being -- Seth being a GA for you and KB kind of coming in from, I think college, to all of a sudden becoming some of the best at their positions?

PHIL PARKER: Want me to go first? Well, obviously KB I recruited out of high school. So it's kind of interesting that he came and was on our team then early. We won't go back that far.

Anyways, I just think they did such a good job, you know what I mean. We have a lot of good guys in the room over there, not only the coaches to help us out; the staff, we have been around each other for a long time and we know what we have to do to solve our problems and we know our issues and what we have to do.

And then there's also these other guys that we call boots on the ground that do a lot for us that sometimes give us so much information and makes the thing run so smoothly that we are able to spend more time with our players and give them more information to help them play better.

I think just knowing each other and how we work together has really been good.

JAY HIGGINS: I definitely attest to the effort that the staff has. Everybody takes their job so serious. As players, we can obviously tell the buy-in and sacrifices from our coaching, and we truly appreciate that. Any time our coach with put us in a better situation, make anything easier on us, we know they are always trying to find answers to do that.

PHIL PARKER: I'll go back to that a little bit, Jay. The good thing about having guys that are -- like, Jay is another coach on the field, as you guys like to say -- because I could call something, you know, first down, second down or whatever. But there are some things sometimes that he might just change the call because he sees something; and that's the beauty about having, really, another coach on the field, and that's what Jay has put himself in and that's why he's such a good player.

Q. You mentioned the 54 plays that Nico has played, pretty small sample size. He's in the game with twos and threes, late in the game, the score is out of hand. Does that add a level of difficulty in knowing what he prefers, what he may do on the field?

PHIL PARKER: I think when you see a guy on the field and you see the way he moves and see how he can throw the ball and his running ability that you have to be concerned about, I don't think -- if a guy is on the field, if somebody is out there playing, you've got to respect everybody you're playing. I think that, you know, I always believe that, you know, this is the best opponents. Everybody is going to play their best. We want them to play their best and hopefully that we can meet their challenge to go play against them.

But we take it -- you know, everybody, doesn't matter whether they are the first-time starter, fifth or they have five snaps or if they had 25 snaps or if they had 400. They are all treated the same; that's the best guy we are playing, and you guys better be on your game.

Q. Now that you're coming back, how many Hawks will Roy get to between now and next year? What's the limit?

JAY HIGGINS: He told me he's going to take it easy next season but I don't believe that for one bit. So neither should you guys.

But he's just a happy dad. When I came in freshman year, I feel like he was the same way on Twitters. I just wasn't making any plays, so nobody really knew about him. Just happy he can get some traction.

Q. And Phil, wanted to does about Xavier Nwankpa. It was a year ago, he got his first career start, Pick-Six, big splash moment. What has he done this year, even though he has not had the numbers, to maybe be a much better player from last year's Music City Bowl to this year's Citrus Bowl?

PHIL PARKER: Last year he was just so young and probably not as vocal and not understanding exactly what he had to do in the system. I think he knows the system really well, knows where he fits in. What I've seen, he has been playing with a little bit better leverage, and his ability to get to the ball a little bit better. The change of direction has improved.

So I'm really pleased the way he's going. Like everybody else, we want him to keep growing and improving, and I think he's doing that. I'm really excited to see what he's doing. He's coming back.

And obviously last year, he had a pick, was kind of interesting, because he dropped them all during practice and he picked it in the game. But then going back to that, that was a new quarterback then, too. Different quarterback at that time because of last year or the year he

opted out.

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