

TransPerfect Music City Bowl: Iowa vs Kentucky

Friday, December 30, 2022

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Nissan Stadium

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're now about to welcome University of Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz.

Coach Ferentz, welcome to the TransPerfect Music City Bowl. This is the silver anniversary of the bowl. In recognition of that, we are presenting you with a silver gold record. Feel free to sing if you like. We're excited to have you here and welcome.

(Record presented.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll have a couple of remarks from Coach Ferentz, then open it up to the media.

KIRK FERENTZ: I can't even sing Happy Birthday, we'll skip that, spare you all.

Good morning. Great to be here in Nashville. We thought we were going to be here a couple years ago, didn't make it unfortunately because of the pandemic, all of the things going on. But this is certainly a much better trip because that would have been in and out like an away game like all the games that year.

Certainly it's been a great week for our team, very appreciative of being invited. What a great venue it is. The bowl committee does a great job of putting on a really nice time for our players. That's most important. It's a reward for them.

We're extremely excited to play in the TransPerfect Music City Bowl. Really looking forward to the challenge against Kentucky. It's interesting that we started the new year a year ago against Kentucky in another bowl, now we're going to finish it up 360-plus days later. That's interesting.

Everybody in our program has tremendous respect for Kentucky. Obviously a lot of firsthand knowledge. Also Coach Stoops, the great job he's done. You watch their team on film this year, another really good football team.

Excited about that challenge, opportunity.

I think in a lot of ways there's a lot of parallels and similarities between our seasons. We both experienced some really tough, heartbreaking losses. I think both teams really showed great resiliency, pushed through, fortunate enough to make it here. We're really happy about that.

I think probably the thing this season I look back, really proud of our guys, the way they handled the entire season. But most important the past couple weeks. I think all of us realized there's a lot going on in college football right now, a lot of big issues that really need to be addressed. I'm certain of that. More immediately just what the challenges are for I'm guessing most teams this month, this past month with roster changes, injuries you have from the season, transfers, all those different things that are going on.

For a team to really pull together and get ready for a bowl game is not easy. The guys are contending with finals, finishing up their academics, also preparing for a game.

Just really been impressed with our players, their focus, the way they've worked going back several weeks ago. We've had really good leadership this year. That's been consistent. Not only our seniors, but our experienced guys. They've done a great job leading the way for all of our guys.

December, it gives everybody a chance to watch younger players get extra work, coaching, watching them grow and develop. That's a huge part of college football. That part has been great, too.

We're excited to be here. This is our 20th invitation now. The more things change, two things really stay the same. We're extremely appreciative again to have this opportunity. We never take it for granted. The other thing is the goal is to win the game. That's where our focus has been. I'm sure Kentucky is doing the same thing. Look forward to the challenge tomorrow.

I'll throw it out.

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THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. There's a lot of players around the country like Jack Campbell and Sam LaPorta that aren't playing in their bowl games. What does it mean for guys like them and Riley Moss, what does it mean for the program to have them take that step and play?

KIRK FERENTZ: I'm not here to judge anybody. It was two weeks ago tomorrow, I was driving over to a little place for breakfast with a couple of recruits. Heard a guy on the radio talking about that very same topic. He was coming from a whole different place.

I don't think he ever -- I don't know if he played football or not, I don't know. Didn't recognize the name. But he's an authority of some type. He kind of took that stance like why would a kid play in a game that's senseless for a senior.

I guess the difference is everybody's got different ways of looking at it. Again, I'm not judging anybody. I know with Jack and Sam, ironically or interestingly, a year ago, a year and a week ago, they came in my office, we had a little break, they had gone home and let me know after thinking about it there's no way they weren't coming back this year. They had that decision to make a year ago.

That's how they're wired. If you are going to have a good football team, you have to have guys like that. We've had a lot of good players (tearing up). That's the fun of the guys like that, the attitude. The impact that has on a team, it's really impressive. That's the beauty of it.

Again, everybody has the right to make up their own minds. Got to do what's best for you ultimately. We get that. We encourage that. It's really what makes it valuable to have guys like that. It's no coincidence they're both captains for us.

Q. How have you seen Sam grow as a leader over the years?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sam has been always been upbeat, always ready to go every day. He's been that way since he walked in.

But he's earned that respect just by who he is, how he conducts himself on a daily basis. He lives it every day.

You get older, you're a little bit more experienced. I think it's not like he has his hand up, but he's just doing things the right way. That's what good players do, leaders do. They do it on a daily basis, not some of the time.

Q. Have you detected any kind of revenge factor in the players' minds? Could you talk about that some, if you detected any of that out of your players?

KIRK FERENTZ: I don't know if that's, like, a prominent thought. Our guys are mindful that we came up short last year. It was a heck of a game. Went right down to the wire. To Kentucky's credit, they made the play at the end that ended the game.

It was a close, tough contest. I'm assuming it's probably going to be the same way tomorrow. Teams haven't changed a lot in terms of their approach, what have you. Both of us have some wild cards and variables. That's going to make it interesting.

I think hopefully our guys want to line up every time, no matter who we're playing, come out on top. That's always been the objective.

Q. I would say the one variable that never changes about bowls is the preparation, getting the practice time, especially for younger players. What have you seen from your offensive line, the growth maybe over the last month? Have any taken those steps forward that you really look at and go, okay, this guy is putting in the right position for not only this year, game, but in the future?

KIRK FERENTZ: Right. As you know, that's critical for us. It's been a process. It's been a process the last two years. I thought we grew last year as the season went on. I think one of our best games probably was at the end, our last contest. We're hoping that happens tomorrow.

I mentioned the whole team I think has really practiced pretty well this entire block, the last three-plus weeks. The offensive line in particular, you just see them being a little bit more cohesive, a little bit more definitive with their actions, decisions, those types of things. That is encouraging.

You can only do so much sitting in a chair, watching film, having meetings; you have to get out and do things, practice your techniques.

Really pleased. Left to right, all the guys have taken steps. Some of the younger kids are coming along, too. Hopefully won't have to dip too deep tomorrow.

Q. Do you know after all this bowl prep, three weeks, do you know what you're going to get out of Joe Labas tomorrow or is it a total mystery to you? Sounds like he's a good guy at improvising. What is the approach



with him?

KIRK FERENTZ: I mean, quarterbacks always have to be smart about when they take chances, trying to throw one in there at the end of the half versus first drive, something like that, there's some decisions there.

Joe has been great. He's really been great. A little scary at the front end. That's where the volume of having a chance to get on the field and do work, talked about the offensive line, but maybe most importantly Joe and Carson. Reality is threes and fours don't take many snaps during the year in your system. The one and twos do that.

I'm not sure we've ever gone into a game where our one and twos are gone, not in the roster. Fortunately we had an extended period here. I think the last two weeks Joe has really done a lot of good things. Seems like he's more comfortable.

All that being said, it's going to be his first play in college football. Maybe we'll have Campbell hit him in the locker room a couple times, loosen him up a little bit there (smiling). In the head a little bit, too, so he's not thinking too much (laughter).

He's a competitor, he's tough. I'm sure he's going to do a great job for us.

Q. When Mark Stoops was a player, did you think of him as future head coaching material? What's your reaction to the success he's had at Kentucky where so many coaches have struggled?

KIRK FERENTZ: First thing I always remember about Mark is when he was sitting in Bill Brashier's office, Coach Fry's longtime defensive coordinator. Bill came in the staff meeting later that day and just said, I had to remind he's a Stoops because I swear he looked like he was 13. Young, not very put together at that point, coming out of high school.

But all three of them played for us basically in the '80s. One of our safeties was always No. 41, a Stoops. All three of them were excellent players, the kind of players you could really see becoming a coach.

Phil Parker is on our staff. This is crazy. I was an assistant for nine years in the '80s. I used to watch him play, thinking he could be related to the Stoops, just the way he played. He was a smart, tough player. I'd say the same thing about all three of the Stoops brothers.

But Mark has done an outstanding job. I'm not an expert on the history of Kentucky football, but I'm not surprised at

all because Mark comes from a great football background. He's a serious football guy, a great guy. That's what it takes, it takes a lot of work and effort. Obviously Mark has done that. I'm really very, very happy for him.

Q. Obviously Will Levis has been the guy all year for Kentucky. At this point he's not playing. What has been your approach these last few weeks in terms of preparing for Kentucky's options at quarterback?

KIRK FERENTZ: We knew Will out of high school. We were his first major offer. Didn't last long, but...

We've known about him, got to face him a couple times now. Him not being in there, it just is what it is. We're not quite sure, quite frankly, what to expect. There's some film available with Will not playing.

You just never know what to expect. That's probably true of bowl games, too. If anything, we simplify some things, make sure we're sound in all areas, kind of wait and see how things unfold.

Q. Looking ahead, how important is a fully effective NIL collective for you with Swarm, looking forward in terms of competing?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think it's a sign of the times. There's a lot of changes in college football right now. That's something that's going to continue to change. We're maybe at right now probably way different than six months ago, and it's going to continue to evolve.

Just like a lot of things that are on our horizon, if you will, in college football. There will be another time for that.

Right now we're just trying to kind of focus on Kentucky, got our hands full there.

Q. In talking to Jack Campbell, he said that the main reason why he came is to play for you, everything you've done for him, everybody else. What does it mean for you to have a player of his stature say that at this stage of his career? He could walk away and nobody would think differently.

KIRK FERENTZ: You're hitting my buttons there. Appreciate that (smiling).

Jack Campbell, if Joe the clown was coaching, he would say the same thing. Jack is just -- everything is -- it's kind of like Yanda was the same way. Everything he looks at and sees is opportunity. He's extremely humble and appreciative (tearing up).



You coach a guy like that, with all due respect to our defensive staff, you coach a guy like that, it ain't hard, right? He's an unbelievable young guy. We've had a lot of great players. Cool thing about being here, practice day, we Chic Ejiasi, Karl Klug, Greg Mabin, Trudack [phonetic], and (indiscernible) didn't make it over.

That's the fun of coaching. With all the crazy stuff going on on the horizon, all the stuff in college football that's distracting, quite frankly, the fun is being on the practice field or game field with guys like that. That's what the game is about.

Can't say enough about Jack. We've had so many good, young guys. This whole team has been really good to coach and work with. I'm just appreciative of that.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Ferentz, thank you very much. Good luck tomorrow.

KIRK FERENTZ: Thank you.

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other week, what's going to work, what is going to be good, how many ways can you dress that up and run it while incorporating the strengths of who is on the field that week, be it the quarterback or anyone else.

Q. Brian, if you were to give yourself a self-evaluation, how would you answer that?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I would say I do the best I could this year with the pieces we had to try to put the team in position to win.

Was I successful every week? No. Was I successful enough? I wish we would have won every game we played. That's the bottom line to me.

My evaluation is simple: Are we doing what we need to do to help us win football games? I think the record speaks for itself. We are who our record says we are.

Q. Coach Parker, how important have these bowl practices been to the development and depth at cornerback? What have you seen from guys like TJ Hall, Deshaun Lee, Jamison Heinz, and maybe a few others this stretch of December?

PHIL PARKER: I think it's been very helpful for the last three or four weeks, these guys practicing, getting an opportunity to go in there.

Probably the biggest guy I've seen jumped is probably Xavier. He's really done a good job of taking a lot of reps, the improvement with his just understanding, the way he moves on the field has changed in the last three or four weeks. I'm really happy to see.

It's going to be his first start. See how he does. But really impressed with what he's doing.

Q. Brian, you talked about changes going into this past season. Obviously didn't work out. Why do you think it didn't work out? What changes do you anticipate making next year to avoid this script from repeating another year?

THE MODERATOR: We're going to hear from the University of Iowa offensive coordinator Brian Ferentz and defensive coordinator Phil Parker.

Questions, please.

Q. Brian, you get Joe in his first career start tomorrow. What has been your approach throughout the bowl prep? Install 18 to 20 players he mastered, new wrinkles?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Joe has been around for several years. He's been in the offense. He's worked through spring ball and training camp. This year he's traveled with us, been up there with the first and second group, gotten reps at times.

There's a knowledge space that you're not starting from scratch. That makes it a little easier.

Like anyone else, you want to tailor what you're doing to the player's strengths. I think Joe has some different strengths, maybe the two guys that have played for us the last several years. You want to make sure you incorporate that into what you do.

On top of that, you want to match up what you're going to see as well, right? We see our defense every day in bowl prep. That's one thing. But to see Kentucky's defense is a whole different animal. Play different up front, base out of some different coverages. You want to make sure you're doing things that are going to be reasonably successful against who you're playing.

At the end of the day what's the number? It's not broad, it never is, though. I think that's a misconception. We're never walking into a game with 150 calls on the sheet, right? You're trying to walk into the game, it's like any

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BRIAN FERENTZ: I think every year you go into the off-season and you look at things you did well, things you didn't do well. How do we accentuate the things we didn't do well, how do we improve the things we didn't do well.

In some regards, progress was made. In other regards, not as much. And then in other regards, I think we regressed in some areas.

The challenge in January and February, which really has already begun throughout December, is identifying all three of those areas, figuring out the best plan of attack moving into next year.

Certainly you want to take into account personnel. You want to take into account scheduling to the best that you can, right? You know who you're going to play well in advance. It goes back to the question that Dave asked earlier. Essentially you're trying to do that with a big-picture understanding in January and February, then moving into March you begin to rep those things.

Q. Any younger guys that have developed during bowl prep that jumped out at you? Also, how is Sam LaPorta as an emergency quarterback?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I'll let you start.

PHIL PARKER: One guy that really jumped out, he's been banged up a little bit, but Jay Higgins has taken a bigger role, seeing how he's developing and becoming a leader. Obviously we're losing Jack. That's going to help us in the linebackers between him and Seth. And Seth, we're losing him. I think that's a good guy we're seeing a lot of progress with.

Down in the front, I think all the guys up front are doing a really good job, we're seeing improvement. You win with the up-front guys. If you don't have up-front guys, seven guys, it's hard to win games. I think they've all been doing a pretty good job.

It's just the way they go about their work. We're excited to see some of these guys, how many steps they have taken.

BRIAN FERENTZ: As far as young guys go, it's been nice. Jaziun Patterson is a guy that jumped out to me through bowl prep. Didn't get so many opportunities throughout the season when we were playing three backs. Played a little bit in a couple games sparingly.

The way he approaches every day, I heard the head coach talk about Jack Campbell, seeing things as an opportunity. Jaz is a guy that I would describe the same way. Maybe hopefully he can have the type of career that Jack had.

None of us control our talent, right? We can only control our approach. His approach is very impressive, the way he goes to work. He's a guy that's jumped out.

There are several others, but I would single him out just for his approach day to day. That was true during the season. Now he's been able to get some reps, and it's really showed up.

Then as far as Sam LaPorta as an emergency quarterback, I've coached some players, I've coached some good players. I don't think you guys are going to get me to lose my composure here, but Sam LaPorta is as good a football player as I've ever coached, probably the best one.

He's an exceptional competitor, very talented. The way he practices, the way he plays, if my son could grow up, if he could just emulate that, whatever he chooses to do, I'd be awfully proud of him.

For Sam, it's interesting, I was talking to a gentleman that runs an all-star game. He was a little upset that Sam wasn't going to play in it. Sam felt like he put enough on tape. I happened to agree with him, I think he's put plenty on tape for NFL teams to evaluate.

He made the comment to him that people are going to question your competitiveness or your character if you don't play in this game. Frankly, I think that's ridiculous. Anybody that has ever been around Sam, that's the last two things you question.

How do I see him as an emergency quarterback? I think he'll probably make some plays because that's generally what he does when he has the ball in his hands.

Q. How tough has it been in your evaluation of Kentucky with their quarterback situation? Have you gone back and watched high school game film?

PHIL PARKER: Well, we've seen them on some huddle stuff. Obviously some of the camps that he's been at throwing the ball.

Really you kind of say how they're going to try to attack us. They have an offense that we prepared for of one system, now you got a different offensive coordinator going to be calling it, Vince. I'm sure he'll have some tricks up his sleeve.

It's going to be interesting for us. Basically what it comes down to, I think they can only have 11 guys on the field. A lot of base defense, understanding it. We'll change it up,



make sure we did some run games with the quarterback maybe a little bit more than the other guy.

Right now I think our preparation has been very good for the last three weeks. We've been seeing a lot of different things, formations.

Sometimes when you go into it, what are you doing? Practicing this, practicing this. Eventually they're going to go out there and we're going to have to play whatever they line up.

I think it all goes back to guys understanding their base principles. When you get a call, you have to line up your alignment, your keys, responsibilities on every play. Three simple things to do, but within those three words: Alignment, how do you line up based on where they're lined up? What are your keys? What is your responsibility? What are you looking at?

I think that's really the biggest thing. You don't see it a lot. If you start watching film, you start watching teams, how they play, you get to see things, diagnose it, make a quick decision on what your responsibility is.

If you're a pass guy, play pass. Even though it's run, I'm playing pass, see if it's run, but make sure you double-check and see if your pass responsibility is taken care of. Is he blocking, faking it? There's a lot of things.

I think it comes down to alignment, keys and responsibility, that's it. Obviously being competitive. To get all the strength and all that, the movement, stay in balance. I think our guys for the last three weeks have really been doing a good job.

There will be some surprises out there. If you go through your progression, you shouldn't be faked out on those trick plays if you're doing what you're supposed to do.

But it's hard though because there's going to be 60, 70 plays in the game. Can somebody concentrate? The play only lasts five or six seconds, right? But you're out there. Can you focus the whole time?

Even before the snap of the ball, your focus has to be on who is on the field, how are they lined up, who is talking to who. I remember seeing Brady, I don't remember who he was playing, tapped somebody on the back of the shoulder, a wide receiver. I seen him run a come-back. If the defensive back paid attention to him, might have been a better play out there for the defensive back.

It's been a while ago, probably three or four weeks ago. But it's just interesting what you see. You have to gather

all that information. There's a lot of information out there. You should be totally physically and mentally exhausted after the game if you're doing what you're supposed to be doing.

Q. Brian, last time we talked before Ohio State, there was a lot of outside noise after that game. Does any of that make it to you? What is your reaction to the criticism that filters your way? How have you responded?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Is that a serious question?

Q. Sure. Did you read the article?

BRIAN FERENTZ: No. I feel like we've covered this ground for all the Ohio guys in the room, right?

My focus is on doing my job every day. Does criticism make it to me? Of course it does. My wife has criticism from me on a daily basis. All of this gets back to me in some form or fashion.

None of it matters. My job is every day to wake up, try to put our players in position to be successful. That's it. Whatever my reaction is to it has no bearing on my ability to do my job. I keep my focus on that.

Just like Phil said, he's talking about playing defense. I don't think coaching is any different. Alignment keys, responsibility, do your job every day. If the things don't help you do your job, then you can't spend a lot of time worrying about them.

Q. Brian, one element that never changes or can't change is age. That deals a lot with your offensive line. When you look at Logan Jones flipping over from D tackle to center, what is the progress that he's made in that position? Also one player, one of the biggest humans I've ever seen, Gennings Dunker. What is his potential and how far away is he from making a big impact on the field?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, I think the good news is, like you said, both those guys have a tremendous amount of tools. They have a tremendous amount of potential. It's just a race to maturity. It's a race to getting them to maximize those things.

I think Logan has done an exceptional job flipping over through spring football, starting 12 games for us at center. Probably doesn't get enough attention what a tremendous job he's done. It's not easy. It's very difficult.

In Gennings' case, he dealt with some injuries his



freshman year. Missed a lot of practice time. Then you're able to get him on the field in spurts this spring and then the summer. Every time he's been out there, he's made strides and continued to improve.

He's a guy that over the course of the season has really improved and taken some strides. No question he's a big man. He just kind of walks around, he has a certain demeanor to him. Even when he turns his head, he reminds me of Arnold Schwarzenegger playing The Terminator. If you cut him open, there was a cyborg underneath, it wouldn't shock me. He probably has a little more personality than that.

He's an exciting guy, a young guy with a lot of potential that you're excited to see continue to grow and improve.

We've talked about offensive line development before. In a perfect world, you put those guys in the oven and you slow cook 'em. Neither of those guys have had that liberty. That's not their fault. They've handled the circumstances as well as they can.

What I'm excited about is the improvement they've made. I would expect them to continue to make that with reps.

Q. What have you seen from some of the younger linebackers who might have a bigger role next year? You've gotten an influx of talent to the transfer portal. Are there any specific changes that have been promised to get them to come to an offense that ranked 130th out of 131 teams?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I'll start.

No, no. There were no promises made. We recruit players to try to fit our system and our program. We're recruiting people first and players second. That's never changed.

We're excited about those two guys joining us. Quite frankly right now, my focus is on the football players that are going to play for us tomorrow, some of them in their last football game. I look forward to giving them my full attention and focus right now.

PHIL PARKER: At the linebacker depth, Harold is a guy that's actually seen him grow. Kind of funny, even today's practice, more of a polish day. You already had the practice and stuff.

Then you see Jack Campbell sitting there telling him and teaching him as he's leaving the last play, telling him what he needs to do for the next play. That growth right there. Hopefully we can maybe get Jack to come back and coach a little bit.

But I just think the connection, the development that he's done, it's all coming from the leadership in that room, beginning with Seth Benson, Jack, what Seth Wallace has done with these guys. Obviously done a great job. You see the trend of these guys improving. I wish they could do it faster. But it's a good thing to see.

Q. Regarding Kaleb Johnson, he's made a lot of growth, it's obvious. A lot of improvement. He also seems like he has a lot more potential. What do you see from him? How has he grown through the course of the season and what do you see for him a year, two years down the road?

BRIAN FERENTZ: It's kind of like Logan and Gennings. Asked a question about those two guys. I'd lump any first-year player in the same category.

It's kind of like if you go in the weight room, you've never trained, you're going to see some really exponential growth out of the gate. But then things are going to slow down, right?

Right now those guys have been drinking through a firehose. They've handled it pretty well. Specifically Kaleb, he goes from playing high school football to being a starting running back in the Big Ten Conference and taking a lot of carries. Not easy. Just the physical demand of that is very difficult. He's handled that very well.

He's a guy that I can't think of a time he's missed practice or missed a rep or missed anything, due to being nicked up, right? His durability has been very impressive.

On top of it, the mental strength, if you take the football part from the school, the expectations, the attention, some of those things, I think he's handled that very well, too. I'm encouraged by that.

From a football standpoint, the easiest thing for a running back is to carry the football. Even within that, you can detail a lot of what they're doing, right? A natural ball carrier, you don't want to over-coach them. If you can just get their track exactly right to marry the blocking.

Timing is a huge aspect of what backs do. It's really no different than the passing game. You want to make sure the timing of what they're doing, what they're running is matching the blocking. You'll always be able to polish that as years go on, get that tighter, a little cleaner. I expect that to happen.

Without a doubt, the biggest thing I think for running backs moving out of high school football into college football is

pass protection. It's difficult enough from a fundamental aspect to block any kind of blitzing linebacker or secondary player, but just from an assignment standpoint a lot of times running backs have one of the more difficult jobs on the field. They need to see a lot.

Experience is a huge feature with the pass protection aspect. I would anticipate, as the years go on, he's going to clean a lot of things up, get a lot better. I don't want to guess what he'll look like in two years. I don't have a crystal ball.

My guess is if he continues operating the way he operates right now, I think his future is probably bright.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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Kentucky Wildcats Coach Mark Stoops Scott Ramsey

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THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Welcome to Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center. Thank you for being here. During our news conference today, we'll hear from the head coaches from each team as well as their coordinators.

I would like at this time to introduce Scott Ramsey, president and CEO of the TransPerfect Music City Bowl and the Nashville Sports Council.

SCOTT RAMSEY: Good morning. Thanks for being here. On behalf of the city of Nashville, our board of directors, our staff, our volunteers, welcome to Music City. We're looking forward to our 25th annual game. We're excited about having and hosting University of Kentucky and University of Iowa in this year's game.

It's been interesting over the last few months as we've approached the 25th anniversary of trying to be able to reflect back on the meaning of what the bowl has been for our city.

To think back 25 years ago to the week between Christmas and New Year's being one of our slowest weeks of the year tourism-wise, how the bowl has served as a catalyst in creating the energy and the excitement around sports and entertainment that you've experienced this last few days and will experience over the next couple has truly been exciting and very reflective for our organization.

Also one of the things that's been fun is to look back and see some of the great players and teams that have participated in our bowl. I know a couple days ago or earlier this week we released our 25th anniversary team as voted on by the fans. It was exciting to see some of the great players that have played in Nissan Stadium, and hopefully we'll see some of those great players in action tomorrow as well.

It's also exciting to look forward. Sometimes when you hit milestones, you can reflect; it's also a great time to reenergize and think about the future. Certainly there's a lot of changes going on in post-season college football over the next few years.

We're really excited about where Nashville is positioned in taking the opportunity to really accelerate and be very aggressive in where we can take Nashville in the scope of post-season college football.

It's also exciting to know we've got incredible partners. Southeastern Conference, Big Ten Conference have been incredible to our city and to our organization. ESPN is our broadcast partner. Our new title sponsor, TransPerfect, has really stepped in, has really energized our event.

I've got to give them a lot of credit. There's not a lot of sponsors that would jump in in the middle of a COVID year, had a cancellation late, University of Iowa, unfortunately, and stick with the organization in a new sponsorship. This will be the second game we actually get to play, even though it's the third year with TransPerfect. Want to that happening them for their support.

As we prepare for tomorrow's game, every city kind of has their key to the city. In Nashville, in Music City, we do it a little bit differently. I'd like to officially welcome Coach Stoops and Mike Edwards, our representative from TransPerfect, and present him with a silver record for participation in this year's game.

(Record presented.)

THE MODERATOR: Coach Stoops, if you wouldn't mind joining us up onstage.

We'll hear a few comments from Coach Stoops, then we'll open it up for questions from the media.

MARK STOOPS: Thank you very much. I'd first like to recognize Scott Ramsey. Thank you so much. The folks from TransPerfect, it's been an amazing week. I really appreciate our players, the work that they've done, the



relationship that we've had with the Music City Bowl for some time. It's been a lot of fun.

Our players have worked extremely hard this season. There's always ups, there's downs. Our players have persevered, fought and worked through that.

I'd also like to acknowledge the Hawkeyes. Happens to be my alma mater. I have such great respect for Kirk Ferentz, the complete Hawkeye program. It's a special place to myself being that I played there, my brothers played there. We have a long history with the Hawkeyes, and it will be an honor to go compete with them tomorrow.

You know what kind of game it's going to be: a tough, physical game once again. It's going to be a close game. I think it will be a game that people really enjoy watching.

I think there's been a lot of discussion, a lot of things, there's a lot of change in college football right now, but I can promise you, with these two teams, the pride that we have within our institutions, that we are looking forward to this opportunity, looking forward to competing, and looking forward to representing our places in representing the Music City Bowl, the long history that they have in college football and in the bowl season. It's going to be a lot of fun.

It's been a great experience. Again, I think our players have handled themselves very well. We had good preparation back in Lexington prior to our little break. Got here. Guys have been doing a good job.

We're looking forward to it. With that I'll open it up for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. I'm going to ask you more of a broad question than anything specific. With so much change in the last couple of years in college football, is there anything that really needs to be centered on or focused on in the next 6 to 12 months that you think needs to help stabilize what's going on, otherwise it could be a runaway train?

MARK STOOPS: I believe it's already a runaway train. I'm not sure I have the time or this is the platform to answer all those questions.

I don't think I have all the answers. I think there's a lot of people that have worked really hard. We're trying to make it better for our student-athletes. We're trying to improve the game, help in many ways.

But it's in a different place. There's no question. Right

now for me, the best way to do it is just to adapt. It is what it is. We didn't make these rules, but we better be as good as we can at them.

I think the leadership of college football needs to get together and we need to find some solutions, some guardrails on some things. There's a lot to unpack right there. There's a lot to work through. It's gotten pretty far away from us at this point. Hopefully we can reel it back in at some point.

Q. What do you want to see from your quarterbacks tomorrow? Is it important to keep the offense wide open just to let them show what they can do?

MARK STOOPS: Well, yeah, it's very important. I mean, the first thing that you have to look for is just command, the guys that can operate the offense, move the football. It's going to be a great challenge with the Hawkeyes. They do a great job defensively.

I think you're going to hear from Brad White, our defensive coordinator, who I think the world of, one of the best defensive coordinators in the country. Certainly you could look at Iowa, Phil Parker, the job he's done, how good they are defensively. Two of the best defensive coaches in college football, in my opinion.

It will be a challenge, but our quarterbacks have looked good. Both of us, we're going to play a quarterback that's inexperienced. We'll see where it goes. I think both of us will tell you it's very important to play well around them. We have some guys with experience that have played that need to step up and do the best job that they can to help the quarterback out.

Q. A lot is predicated on wins and losses. To hear your captains and seniors talk about this game meaning something to them, setting the tone for the next group, the next team. How much does that mean to hear, especially with the way things are with so many players sitting out games?

MARK STOOPS: Yeah, I think it means a great deal to us, to see guys that are working extremely hard, that are injured. Guys like Jaquez, guys that have good reason to sit out but choose to play. It says a lot about them individually. It says a lot about our culture, our team, what we're striving to do.

As I mentioned, I think Coach Ferentz could come up here, any coach in the country, there's a lot of close calls, what-ifs. Like to maybe have a few plays over, games, certain opportunities. But that's life. That's college, that's football.



I'm proud of the way our team persevered and pushed through and finished strong. We want to continue that. We won four bowl games in a row. That's not easy. It will be a great challenge.

I was thinking about that the other day, when you play a team like Iowa, it's hard to beat 'em once, then you go back-to-back years and you know what a challenge that will be.

Q. How much did it mean to you last year when you got the opportunity to coach on a sideline opposite of a place that has a special place in your heart? What will it mean to you to be able to do that one more time?

MARK STOOPS: I think it was definitely a little different last year for me. I acknowledged that, I think, going into it and playing them. It's been a while as a head coach, playing the Hawks. It's seeing those colors when you walk out there, definitely was different.

I think at this point it's different now. Let's play the game. I know what a great challenge it is. Really more businesslike this year and wanting to prepare the team, put them in a good position to win.

Q. Before this press conference started, you rolled out a name, image and likeness call to action, if you will.

MARK STOOPS: I did?

Q. On your social media.

MARK STOOPS: News to me (smiling).

Q. What are the kind of the latest on y'all's efforts? How involved can you be in it? Organizationally, are things where they kind of need to be for you to succeed in that landscape?

MARK STOOPS: I did review the video that you were talking about a day or two ago. Wasn't sure when they were releasing it.

Yeah, we're in a good position. I think our administration has worked really hard with us to get ourselves in a position where we can be successful, I think, as I've mentioned before, so the foundation, the roots are in place.

I think any coach that sits up here would say you need -- I mean, it's just the way it is, you need money in the collective. There's no denying that. Everybody in our organization wants to support that collective, help our players.

Again, we didn't create those rules. Neither did the Hawks. It's part of a much broader system that is in place right now that we all have to adapt and be able to adjust and be successful in that area.

So we need the money (smiling).

Q. You've had a strong tight end room all year. Now for various reasons you don't. What kind of challenge does that present?

MARK STOOPS: It will be different. There's guys that will step up. It will be nice to see Isaiah out there. We still have both Dingle brothers that have been very successful all year. We'll have the pieces in place to execute.

Q. Obviously you played a lot of younger players throughout the season. How much have some of these guys viewed this almost like an audition to prove what they're capable of doing?

MARK STOOPS: Once again, I think it's important. It will be interesting to see. As you see, we played a lot of young guys, as you know. That gets difficult through the entire season. At the end there's some people just kind of hanging on, whether it's physically, mentally. Now we get a little break, a chance to have some time off, get their legs underneath them, decompress a little bit physically and mentally, then get back at it and refocus, get ready to have a really big game.

Those players that have some experience through this year, I'd like to see them have a big game. Then there's some others that have maybe redshirted throughout the year. With the attrition that comes with some of the bowl games for certain reasons, we've had players that are going through surgeries, different reasons that aren't here. Happens to everybody. So therefore it puts some of your players in a position to maybe get on the field that haven't had that opportunity throughout the year.

Jordan Anthony is a guys that jumps out at you with great speed. Brandon White, another player that's redshirted that may have some opportunities to create some plays. Hopefully they'll do some things. There will be some others as well. Nik Hall is another one, Grant Bingham, guys you haven't seen much, but you could see them in this game.

Q. The lead-up to the bowl game, what you have seen from your offensive line? How important is the battle in the trenches against a team like Iowa?

MARK STOOPS: Definitely something that, no question,



will be a point of emphasis for us because you know how stout, you know how physical Iowa is. This year maybe we hadn't been as physical or as consistent as we've been in the last three, four, five years. It's an area where we must step up. We have to.

We have to play well in that area or it won't lead to too much success, so we better play good in the trenches. I have confidence in our guys. I feel like we're healthy. They've worked hard. We've tried to make sure we put them in a position to be successful, simplify some things, make sure we don't beat ourselves, number one.

When you're playing a team like this, expect somewhat of a defensive game, you better be making sure you're putting your guys in a position, not going backwards in turnovers and sacks and things of that nature.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Stoops, thank you very much.

MARK STOOPS: Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

TransPerfect Music City Bowl: Iowa vs Kentucky

Friday, December 30, 2022

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Nissan Stadium

Kentucky Wildcats

Brad White

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Brad White, come on up. Questions, please.

Q. When you look at a running back in Kaleb Johnson from Iowa, what impresses you about him? What is unique about his style that makes it difficult and how good he is?

BRAD WHITE: Yeah, anytime a freshman can run behind his pads as well as he does, it jumps out on film. He's able to turn a three-yard gain into five, six, seven. He's got enough juice to break a big one, so that always in these style of games, you always are nervous about giving up the explosives. He has that ability.

But when you're facing a downhill, power offense, you need to get 'em off schedule. What he allows them to do is to stay on schedule by running hard. He'll push right back into an offensive lineman. It's a subtle move that allows him to gain an extra yard or two. Most probably don't see it, but when you really study him, his ability to not take the direct hit, but it's more of a glancing blow from the side, that allows him to fall forward.

It makes it harder. Instead of being third-and-seven, forcing an offense to be in a throwing situation, now it's third-and-four, third-and-three, and now it becomes a mixed down.

Really impressive for a freshman that early to understand the nuances of the position.

Q. How difficult is it to prepare for Iowa with the quarterback situation, not having film?

BRAD WHITE: Yeah, it's always a challenge. I think a lot of teams run into that in the bowl season with so much transition, whether it be players, whether it be coaches staffs or systems. That's the nature of the business.

The two games that always leave you a little bit in the dark, bowl games, then the first game of the season. So we've had to prepare accordingly. The one thing that you do know when you face a really talented Iowa team is you can pull up their film over the last 10 years, and the core is their core. It's going to start up front.

I think you just heard Coach talk about when you're playing a younger QB, it's the reliance on the pieces around it so he doesn't have to feel like he has to make all the plays. They have plenty of talent surrounding them. The tight ends, we just talked about the running backs. The offensive line is always well-coached and creates movement.

No, they'll put him in situations to be successful. Like any situation for a young player, this is their opportunity. So we're expecting the best out of him. We might have to adjust a little bit in flight during the game depending on whatever style we see.

Q. What challenge does a tight end like Sam LaPorta force for you? How do you game plan against him?

BRAD WHITE: It very much becomes a matchup issue. Do you put a linebacker on him, a safety. He'll get matched up on corners at times, and so now he's a big body.

We've been I say lucky enough, but we were able to face Georgia this year in their two tight end systems, I think Iowa's two tight ends are of that caliber as well. Both LaPorta and Lachey offer really good route running. They're both physical blockers at the point of attack. You can't go small or they'll run it down your throat. If you go big, it's kind of a downfield mismatch.

We saw him last year, knew he was going to be a focal point. He still had a big game. He's a talented player. Talented players find a way to make plays. We have to do a good job of trying to limit them, not let them get explosive. We did not do the best of job of that last year. Took the screen pass for a touchdown, had a big bender around midfield.

But that's going to be a security blanket for a young quarterback, to have two tight ends that can run mid-level routes and get the ball in their hands, know he's going to create space, give him a throwing window to throw in. That's going to be a challenge for us.

Q. Have you scoured high school film of Joe Labas to get a sense of him? As a defensive coordinator, both of you are in the same boat. Do you attack a young quarterback that hasn't really played before or sit back and wait to see what he can do before mounting a game plan?

BRAD WHITE: To the first part of the question, yes. The nice part is that high school highlight films are readily accessible. We were able to watch his high school film. Again, a talented player that can move on the run, make throws on the run both to his strong hand and offhand. Can make some off-platform throws.

You can absolutely see why Iowa was excited to have him come in and how he fits that system.

As far as how we plan to attack, we'll sort of see come tomorrow. I appreciate that (smiling). I don't know if we're fully... It's going to be something based on how they're using him, as well.

Again, when you're a young player, you've got the opportunity to sort of make a name for yourself, there's a little bit of scariness to that because, hey, who knows. You always have to start somewhere. We've had young players this year that had no experience, have played really well for us defensively.

He's going to come in, we anticipate him playing really well. We anticipate him giving them some new sort of juice and energy, maybe a wrinkle or two in terms of his athleticism.

Our guys have to be ready to adapt to that.

Q. I wanted to ask you a little bit about the Georgia tight end combination of Washington and Bowers. How did you try to defend them? What did you take away from that? Iowa's combination is maybe not to that level, but still quality.

BRAD WHITE: Yeah, I think it provided us the ability to lean on something. When you have sort of a good duo of tight ends, our guys can gain some confidence. We came out of that game and played well against those tight ends.

It creates a unique challenge very much to the point of where the Patriots were back in the late 2008, '9, '10, when they had Gronk and Hernandez. If you go small to 12

personnel, they'll run the football; if you go big, they can spread you out. LaPorta can play wide receiver very much like Bowers. Lachey is a lot like Washington, more of the in-line guy.

We've got a little bit of a blueprint for ourselves in terms of how to match up and defend a similar style offense and how they want to attack.

But every team's slightly different. Again, while it may give you sort of a base blueprint, you've got to sort of attack in different ways as well.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

BRAD WHITE: Thank you.

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