

University of Iowa Football

Media Conference

Saturday, September 2, 2017

Kirk Ferentz



KIRK FERENTZ: So last night I told the team, 19th year going into this, and really excited, like every first game, really excited but also really anxious, and I think some of the things you saw out there today would maybe illustrate what that was about. All that being said, the only thing we told the team is our goal is to play tough football, to play smart football, and play physical, and most importantly, stay together. I think that's really what we witnessed today.

There were some bumps in the road today. A lot of that traced back to younger, more inexperienced players. But the guys played through it. The body language was great. The way everybody responded to each other was great, and I thought we played a lot of really good team situational football during the course of the game against a team that posed a lot of problems for us on both sides of the football. You know, you just throw out their offense, the quarterback, that's a pretty obvious discussion there, and then defensively they came with a pretty wide open game plan as well.

So just really pleased with our team's effort and the way they stuck together. And the only thing I would just interject, really pleased in our honorary captain, John Streif, got his victory as well. There hasn't been a better person come through this department the last 40 years than John Streif. He did an unbelievable job with our team yesterday, and it was just great to have him on the sideline and in the locker room with us. I'll throw it out for questions.

Let me just compliment the crowd too because that was a really nice opening day crowd Labor Day Weekend. Someone told me it's Labor Day, right? Great crowd, and they were responsive too there in the game.

Q. Congratulations on getting off to a great start. It seemed like, first off, your defense played great the entire game. A little bit ahead of the offense, which they started to gel a little bit the second quarter and played pretty well the rest of the game. Do you kind of expect that going into your first game? In football, is the defense maybe a little ahead of the offense going into week one sometimes? Or do you expect improvement from week one to week two? How does that work?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think the strength of our defense is up front right now, the front seven, and they certainly did a really good job and helped us through some of the tough spots, navigate through those. We're young on the back end. When Brandon got injured, that really made us a young team. There's not a lot of starts next to Jackson's name or Ojemudia, same thing with Jake Gervase. So it was a real team effort out there.

If you're going to play a quarterback like that, I'll go back to '03 with Roethlisberger, there's some parallels in this game. You're not going to slow him down unless you play really good team defense. So it was a real good effort.

Q. Jackson played really well. What's your take?

KIRK FERENTZ: He did. My only disappointment defensively was coming off the turnover when they hit that bomb on us. That's something we practice. With all due respect, everybody does that, and we practiced that, and it just looked like we'd never seen it. So that was disappointing. Outside of that, I thought we played good team defense.

Q. What specifically were you most excited about, the run defense, the pass rush, kind of a combination? What, in your estimation, was the best?

KIRK FERENTZ: We always want to try to do a good job against the run. I think every good defensive team does. But when you're playing a first round quarterback, that obviously is a big concern. We're a little bit inexperienced at receiver, they are too, so that all equals out.

You want to compare the two quarterbacks, it's night and day in terms of experience and success that they've had at the college level. He's a tremendous quarterback and just has a good demeanor out there in the field. A lot of NFL folks here at the game today, and I think they were looking at him, not anybody on our team. So it's just -- he's a really good player.

Q. What did you think of your quarterback today, Coach?

KIRK FERENTZ: I was really pleased with him. He went through some rough times out there. I mentioned the whole team really responded to the bumps, but I thought he did too. He didn't get rattled. I'm sure he

was internally, but he stayed strong, just stayed steady out there, and some of those throws that he made were pretty impressive and the catches as well. But for Nate to make those kinds of throws, I thought that, especially coming off a couple bumps, that says a lot about his makeup.

Q. Your call on fourth and goal?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, it was, and I just told him come up with a good play. It's easy. Then I blame it on the coordinator if it didn't work. That's the thing about being the head coach, right? You don't think I'm going to make that call.

Q. Three linebackers combined for 38 tackles. They played very good assignment football, and the D-line was doing their job. They did a particularly good job in the flat, it seemed like, covering that part of the game.

KIRK FERENTZ: As you started that question, I was reading your mind, not necessarily that, but that was one of the things I was really pleased about. We've been hurt on the perimeter at times, whether it's running the ball out there or throwing it out there. It all starts with somebody setting the edge out there. Somebody's got to put an end to things there, and we lost it on the quarterback a couple of times. But I thought we did a better job of that today. A lot of it was Ben Niemann, but other guys were involved with it as well.

Q. Coach, it seemed like coming into the season people were talking about how Iowa didn't have any wide receivers or tight ends and they're going to have to play freshmen?

KIRK FERENTZ: I thought everybody did a good job, but certainly that play Easley made -- that was not an easy catch. I think you guys had a better view at it than I did. That was not an easy catch. He made a couple of good catches today. He's a guy that just worked hard in practice. We've been encouraged with him. Hadn't seen him play in a game, at least in Kinnick, and I can say that about a lot of guys on our football team right now.

That goes back to the anxious part. Last night I was a little bit anxious about what I did know. There are some things you don't know, but what you do know sometimes can keep you up at night. But to see him respond like that, that's going to do a lot for his confidence. The throws that Nate made, that's got to do a lot for his confidence, and the things that we have to do now is clean up some of the things we didn't do well. That's what practice is about, and there's nothing like game experience.

Q. So it makes you feel good going into the next

game?

KIRK FERENTZ: They're all going to be tough, and every week poses a new challenge. But the potential is to have a decent offensive football team, and that's what we're shooting for.

Q. You had changes in the offensive line today.

KIRK FERENTZ: Today, day one? Just James has been fighting an injury a little bit. We didn't know if he'd make it by the end of the week. Looked like early in the week he had a chance, and then a little setback. I don't know what the medical folks would have said, but we all agreed Friday that he wasn't playing. Just felt like you've got to look at the big picture. It's like being a parent sometimes. He was knocking on my door, whatever time it was, 2:30 yesterday, but he wants to play. He wants to do it for the team. But it just wasn't a smart decision.

So we held him out today, and can't say enough about Keegan jumping in there, his first game at center. That's not easy. And no exchange problems, which believe me, I was worried about that. Boone's been fighting through injury issues during camp, and we were just hoping he could play and play representative. Looks like he did that. When he's in there, he gives us a lot.

Q. Your thoughts on your young guys?

KIRK FERENTZ: You think of our guys, we had true freshmen playing wide receiver. You had Cedrick on the other side of the ball playing defensive tackle. The guys on the back end outside of Miles, nobody's really had much starting experience. We had a lot of guys on the field who haven't played. So this is really invaluable, only if we make it to our advantage, but it's really a great thing for them all.

Q. In particular, Jake Gervase, your thoughts on him?

KIRK FERENTZ: From where I stood, he looked like he played one heck of a football game. Really pleased. Nobody's been working harder than Jake. He's been doing that a long time, not just when Brandon got injured. He's been working. That's the beauty of team football. When somebody goes down, hopefully the next guy has been working hard to have that opportunity and take it and run with it. He never played perfect, but we're playing against a quarterback that's really dangerous, and that back end held up well today.

Q. I notice there was some parallels with last year, whether it's North Dakota State last year or looking back at the tape for a lot of defense, but offensive line was kind of similar. You had Daniels out last year and Welsh out for that game, and then this year you lose Brandon for this game and Meyers.

Did any thoughts come back to what didn't work in that game and how you might have changed that?

KIRK FERENTZ: My anxiousness, I think of all the what ifs and all the things that can go wrong, so stay away from me as the game gets closer, as that's the case. Believe me, I thought about our center out, those kinds of things. Things you never take for granted, but you'd like to think a center exchange is a lot of magic in college, at least once you start playing. Those are things you have to worry about.

I think, as much as anything, the Wyoming game is more about our attitude going into it. Similarity is that North Dakota State and Wyoming are both well coached teams that are good football teams, and Coach Bohl and his staff, those guys are established, fourth year into this thing now, and they know what they're doing. Those guys show up and play. You don't play the way they did last year by accident.

So we knew that was going to be a challenge, just like North Dakota State last year. We weren't up for the challenge last year, and we were today. So that's really encouraging. Again, I just keep going back to the attitude of this team. If you have attitude, you build off of that.

Q. Did you kind of just expect Josey to play like this every week, in and out?

KIRK FERENTZ: He's a pretty good player. Maybe some of those guys were watching him too. I've encouraged them to. But he's just got something about him, the way he plays, the tempo he plays at. We weren't geniuses. We barely almost blew that whole thing recruitment-wise, but from the day he's walked on campus here, he's just played at a certain tempo. That's how guys like that help the whole team elevate their play, and that's priceless.

Q. Noah Fant had the most targets today. Is that more comfortability with Nate or by design?

KIRK FERENTZ: That's just how the defense plays. They let him go, isolate him, at least on that one. So it's a nice target that can run down the field a little bit. So it's a little risk/reward when you want to bring the kitchen sink. That's a good thing for us.

Q. You used your time-outs at the end of the first half, potentially to give Josh Allen a chance to drive his team down the field. How did that work out?

KIRK FERENTZ: We felt in that situation we had a shot. Obviously, we were hoping to maybe force something in the punt game. It didn't work out that well.

Q. Coach, I have a question not related to today.

What do you think of C.J. Beathard?

KIRK FERENTZ: I didn't get to see the run. I heard about it. He was pretty good when he was here. I thought San Francisco and a couple other teams that were on his trail were pretty smart. He's a really good quarterback, and he's a winner. He's just everything you want, I think, in a quarterback. I'm happy he's off to a good start, at least it sounds like he is. Couldn't be happier. He's a first class young man.

Q. When you look at your corners and the way they tackle, these new guys, Josh Jackson seems really talented, especially against a guy who can throw it like that.

KIRK FERENTZ: It was good to see. We're really careful about how much we tackle live. That probably showed up in some of those turnovers. You always run that risk. But, yeah, I thought, for a first game out defensively, we did a lot of really good things fundamentally, outside of that one off the sudden change, and that's more mental than anything else.

But I thought we did a lot of good things fundamentally for a first time out defensively. And, again, you can build on that. Part of that was our guys on the edge too. But two new corners, yeah, I worry about a lot of things with those guys.

Q. What did you think of the freshmen's play, and A.J. Epenesa especially?

KIRK FERENTZ: Great for him to get started. He's still trying to figure it out totally, but, boy, he goes hard and has a great attitude. He's fun to have on the field. And the other guys were tied in with some -- a turnover, at least Ihmir was. Same thing about him. He's really got a good spirit to him, and he's a football player. We had every intention of giving the football back to him. If the situation came up again, we weren't going to back off of it. But he'll learn from that. He'll learn from that.

It was great to get those guys out there. Whether it was those guys or the first year freshmen, the guys on the back end like O.J., he hadn't really started a game yet either. For those guys to do a good job like that and get this game experience, if we use them right, it will be really helpful for us.

Q. Do you expect James Daniels back next week?

KIRK FERENTZ: We do. Yeah, that's what I told him yesterday. We want to have you Monday or Tuesday full speed, no limit, and all that jazz. What we didn't want to do is deal with this issue five or six weeks from now. It's not fair to him. He's too good a kid and too good a player.

Q. Could you make a parting comment about Iowa State? What are you looking for this year as

opposed to last?

KIRK FERENTZ: In terms of them or us?

Q. Them.

KIRK FERENTZ: I haven't watched it close. The one thing I've noticed without studying them is during the course of the year how much improvement (they made). The team we saw here, that was a new staff with a whole new situation. But midseason on, those guys had it going pretty good, from what I can tell.

There's an excellent coaching staff, and they've got good players and really good players on offense. They're almost the opposite of us, I guess. When we play there or here, it's always a hard fought, tough game. That's what I always expect this time too.