

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll begin with your opening statement.

KIRK FERENTZ: First of all, just appreciate the opportunity to be here and represent the University of Iowa football program at this event.

Certainly a lot of changes in the college football landscape over the years, and I'll take this opportunity, we have four new members joining the conference. So I certainly want to welcome them, and it's certainly a sign of the times. First time ever our conference goes coast to coast now, so it's going to be a little bit of a different dynamic that way as well.

A lot of changes -- portal, NIL, transfers, what have you. Certainly there are going to be more coming. The next couple years will be really interesting to see.

I think the biggest takeaway is it's like always you have to embrace change. It is inevitable. It's part of what we do certainly, and certainly it's part of college football right now. The component is try to look for opportunity as it fits your program, wherever it is that you are.

That is what it is. I think the best thing about what we do, the basics haven't changed, and the single best part about coaching is being around good people, whether it's the young people most importantly you get to work with, or the staff, support staffs, all of those different groups, and kind of come together and have a chance to work for common things. That's really what makes this so enjoyable.

It's special. It's challenging, and hopefully it's rewarding as well. I can certainly say it has been.

As we look forward right now, our 2024 team, first obvious takeaway, we have a very sizable senior class, unusually big class that way. The COVID exemption added to that certainly back in January. Had a lot of guys choose to come back.

I think we have a good leadership base with our football

team based on the work they've done so far. As we get ready to head into camp next week, we're healthy overall, and that's certainly a positive also.

The key thing right now, just like it is every year, is what kind of growth can we demonstrate throughout the month of August and then certainly as the season goes on as well?

Just in a nutshell, defensively, we're about as veteran as I can remember. A lot of good players back and a lot of guys that have done a great job. Like every other team, we expect those guys to be focused on growth and trying to take on new challenges because they're certainly going to be coming at us.

Offensively, certainly a little bit more veteran than we have been, and that's good news for us, especially up front. I think we have the potential to be a good offensive football team, but we still have steps to take, not unlike any season probably.

Then special teams in a nutshell, we've got our deep snapper back. That's usually not headline worthy, but it's really important. We've got our placekicker and our kicker back, Drew Stevens. What is new is we lost our punter, Tory Taylor, who's an outstanding player. I've got a first-year player named Rhys Dakin taking his spot. That will be just an item of interest to see how he develops.

The other thing, I think, of note for special teams is losing a player, Cooper DeJean, who's an outstanding defensive player, but also a great punt returner. That's something that I think is also impactful for our football team.

Just in a nutshell, the team has done a really nice job. Since January when we got started, they've worked well each step of the way, and I think their focus has been good. We're looking forward to next week getting together and hitting the field next Wednesday.

Really this is what you work for. This is the most important time for a football team. The next month in preparation for the last four months.



That's kind of where we're at right now, and I'll open it up for questions.

Q. After disappointing on offense last year, you made the decision to hire Tim Lester as your offensive coordinator. What was the hiring process like, and what makes Tim stand out to you as someone who can get the offense in a good spot?

KIRK FERENTZ: A couple of factors there. We haven't been where we've wanted to be offensively for a couple years. As a coach, you have to evaluate things and be realistic. Certainly last year is an easy thing to point out. Our top three -- if you asked anybody this time last year who were our top three offensive players, they weren't there when we started conference play.

We paid for that, but I thought the guys did a great job of playing with what we had and maneuvering their way through and finding a way to win ten football games.

Going through the search process was interesting. A lot of really good people to visit with -- I say a lot. A small group of good people to visit with. Tim just really stood out. I think he's a really good fit for us, whether you talk about his personality and obviously his offensive background, his expertise, played quarterback, coached quarterbacks, has been a coordinator, and then had a rare opportunity last year to really almost take a coaching sabbatical, if you will, and worked with the Packers and got great exposure to a lot of people offensively and helped out on the defensive side.

He comes with a wealth of knowledge. One thing I do appreciate, he's a former head coach. That wasn't a requisite, but also quickly in the conversation, I think he's got a deep appreciation for how football works, how offense can complement defense, special teams. Everybody is going to be working on the same -- you know, towards the same end. So that part's all been good.

He's been on campus now since February, very positive, very energetic, good teacher and just a good people person. So he relates well to staff, the coaches, all the players. So far, so good.

Q. Kind of along those lines, what have been kind of your biggest impressions from the kind of Shanahan-style offense that Tim has implemented, and how helpful is that visit up to Green Bay as you get ready to implement this in the fall?

KIRK FERENTZ: Every exposure is good, whether it's us implementing it and installing it during spring practice or watching other people do it at a proficient level.

Every offense has its different styles and whatever, but really to me success in offense still gets down to execution. The guys up front have to block, and the receivers have to block, and then somebody's got to do a good job of getting the ball where it's supposed to, and the passing game is the same thing. People have got to get open. They've got to make tough catches, and the quarterback has got to be able to deliver into all sorts of protection.

It's not like you're inventing anything. It's going to be a little bit different certainly, but I think our players took to it quickly.

I went through a similar thing in 1996, I guess it would have been, when we moved to Baltimore, and Ted Marchibroda took over the offense for us. My takeaway from that was the players learned a lot faster than I did. I was the only guy that was stumbling on things that were in my memory bank. The players just move on pretty quickly. It's kind of been that way this way too. It's been a good transition.

All that being said, we've got a lot of work to do the next four weeks.

Q. Cade McNamara seems to be fully recovered from the torn ACL. He says he's 100 percent, I guess, as you go into fall camp. And you've also got Brendan Sullivan here, Big Ten starter. As you go into fall camp, do you view Cade as your definitive starter? If so, why?

KIRK FERENTZ: Well, I do. We played against him right here on this field a couple of years ago in December and got to see him that entire season on film, so we had great respect and admiration for him as a player, a competitor.

Unfortunately for our fan base and the media, nobody's really -- none of you guys have seen him play full speed thus far in an Iowa uniform. So I'm eager to see him perform for us this year. Nobody's more eager than he is, and hopefully he's not too eager.

The good news regarding the injury -- I've told a couple people already today -- back in the '80s, ACL injuries could be unpredictable. No surgery is routine anymore, but fortunately, 30-some years later, the advances in medicine, ACLs, players come back from them all the time without issue. We anticipate that for Cade.

I know he's eager to go. And eager to see Brendan too in practice. It will be fun to work with him. He's been really impressive in the summer program and really competitive guy. He's been impressive in a lot of ways, and seems like he's transitioned really well to Iowa City.

We're eager to see all of our guys out there, but the quarterback position will be something of note, for sure.

Q. To follow up on what you were talking about with Tim Lester, can you go more in depth on his relationships with the quarterbacks on the roster and the impact that he's had on the offense as a whole in the short amount of time he's been there?

KIRK FERENTZ: It's hard to judge impact because we haven't played anybody yet, but I've seen a lot of positive things. Not to oversimplify things, but I've been at Iowa now, this is my 35th year coming up, going back to the '80s. I think one common theme, when we play well up front and we've got good quarterback play, we've got a chance to become a good offense. That's kind of been a common denominator.

We haven't had that opportunity the last couple of years, but I think we're finally in a position where maybe that is realistic. We're certainly hopeful. We'll know more here in a couple of weeks.

Tim's fit in really well. He's just a high-energy guy. He's got really a good grasp of what he wants to do, a good vision of where he wants to go, and he's been very interactive with everybody and the staff in terms of what do you think, what do you guys see, all those types of things.

To me, that's a quality of a good coach and a good leader, and he's certainly in a leadership role.

His transition's been very, very seamless, and it's been very natural. Again, he's a coach, just from my observations, that players tend to gravitate towards. He did play the position. He's coached it for a long time. So he does have a level of expertise with the quarterback spot -- I'm not saying he's right or wrong with his opinions, but I'm just saying he's firm on what he believes and he's been pretty successful.

The players have really jumped in full bore with him, and that's what you hope to see with any coach.

Q. Sticking with the QBs, the depth chart that was just released had McNamara then Lainez, then Sullivan. Would you say that's still a pretty fluid situation, 1 through 3, with the quarterbacks at this point?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, I would say everything is fluid right now. Hopefully it won't be in the fall, but right now everything is fluid.

We could have listed Brendan too. He hasn't put a helmet

on yet for us. When we see him on the field, maybe he'll be in competition with the other three guys.

I expect it to be three guys competing. Cade has more experience than any of them. He has more demonstrated success. That gives him a huge advantage. But, yeah, all three guys will compete. It's the same for every roster spot right now. We don't have anybody that's set. Nobody's entitled to positions. It just doesn't work that way.

Q. I wanted to ask you about tight end Luke Lachey. You've had a good reputation of developing a lot of NFL tight ends. How does he kind of compare and contrast with some of the ones that came before him, and what's his upside this year?

KIRK FERENTZ: Two things about Luke. You know him, so this will resonate. He's just one of the nicest people I've ever met. He's unbelievably just a nice human being, a really first-class guy.

I think we all suspect and know that he's a really good football player, but I think maybe as impressive as anything I saw was the way he handled a very disappointing injury last year. He was fully engaged, fully immersed, and did a great job working with the other guys that were playing where he was supposed to be playing. That's as high a compliment, and that's why he's here right now, the team selected him as one of our leaders.

It's not even close. He's up there at the top. So he's just a great, quality young guy, and he's all about the team. He's an outstanding football player.

One thing, we've had a lot of great tight ends come through our place. You look at a guy like George Kittle, who really has continued to improve, and he's playing at a much higher level -- was starting to play at a much higher level at age 25 than he was at age 21. That's what good players do, they just keep getting better.

One common takeaway, if you look at all the tight ends we've had, they come in different sizes, speeds, makeups, but they've all found ways to really impact the game. Luke certainly fits that. He's more of a conventional tight end, can block in line, but also be a real threat in the passing game.

Q. Before the bowl season started, you had talked about USC and how they used to play defense. What was the genesis behind that comment? Have you had a chance to talk to Lincoln Riley since then?

KIRK FERENTZ: I have not. It was just a takeaway from a bowl game they played in a couple of years ago, drive-by

scouting, if you will, which is dangerous.

It's a curiosity to me because I know they've got good athletes. We've played them, and they're a tough football team. At least they were when we played them five years ago.

My guess is I know they've taken some steps, and my guess is they're going to be really -- we don't play them this year, so that's not our concern. They're going to be a factor in our conference. I'll go out on a limb and make that bowl prediction that they'll be there when it's all said and done.

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