

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Kirk Ferentz

Press Conference



KIRK FERENTZ: I'll start out by saying good morning and good afternoon, other time zones. Really good to be here. Certainly this is the best time for college football coaches. I think we're all, first and foremost, we're undefeated right now. I think all of us are optimistic and excited to get going.

Every year in July it really is kind of the same thing. You start getting a little bit excited, a little bit anxious. Certainly you're eager to get going, but also anxious and a little bit nervous just because you know the amount of work that has to be accomplished. Again, just a really good time of year.

Just a couple of things on the larger scale. I think all of us right now are really going through a period that's really unprecedented. Just a lot of really unique challenges and a lot of transition going on certainly in college football. Our conference is representative of that.

When I got to Iowa in 1981, we had ten schools in the conference. Hence, the Big Ten. It reached from basically Iowa, Minnesota, over to Columbus. Got back there in '99, and that extended over to Penn State to join the conference.

Obviously since that time, picked up two more on the East Coast and four more on the West Coast. Things have really changed that way. Here we are in Las Vegas doing a Big Ten Media Day. A lot of things have changed that are very obvious.

Probably the only constant that I have seen over the last several years is change, and to that point, you really have two choices. The main thing is to try to embrace it and to try to find a way to make it work and stay true to who you are, but also make it work and keep yourself in a competitive position.

It's been a very interesting period in college football. That's for sure. Just want to take this opportunity to thank Commissioner Petitti for all that he's done for the Big Ten, his work and efforts on everybody's behalf and also on

campus. Our director of athletics, Beth Goetz, has been doing a great job as well. I know they've all got a lot of challenges that they've been working through. That is first and foremost.

Regarding our team right now, the '25 team, I have no idea how good we are right now. I don't think many people do. The bottom line, I can tell you this, it's really been a good team to work with. I really like our team.

Started out in January kind of when the calendar flipped, a whole new team, new year, new challenges. I like the guys. I like their attitude, like the way they've worked. Been very, very positive. I think we're also getting good leadership, maybe something I didn't see coming quite as strong as it's materialized.

I think the guys have a good work ethic, so they've done a good job to this point. College football, you've got different phases, and I think they've handled each and every one really, really well. Now we're getting ready to start the most important phase outside of the season, which is preseason practice in August. We're all looking forward to that.

When I got to Iowa in the '80s, really it was a developmental program. That's my big take-away after being there for almost a decade. I think things haven't changed much. It's the nature of who we are, what we are. That's a term that gets used a lot, but that's really who we've been for really 40-plus years now.

This team is really emblematic of that. We've got a handful of guys that are really established players that have played very well in the Big Ten. They've played very competitively and had success. Then we have a really big number of guys that maybe hopefully are ready to take it to the next step and another group of guys that really haven't played at all, but have been doing the work, been doing the day-to-day where they have improved and hopefully will be ready to play in the Big Ten.

August is going to be a big month for us, I think. Certainly, like every team, see how your team progresses and grows. I think with this team in particular, it may go right into



September as well before we really know what our starting line-ups are going to look like, our starting line-ups for the season.

I think back to '08, we had two guys, Ricky Stanzi and Pat Angerer, who really ended up being outstanding players and leaders in our program that went into that season as second team players, and when October came around, they were both starters and did a great job.

I could see some of those kinds of stories as we go. That's kind of where we're at.

As I alluded to earlier, it's a really challenging time in collegiate athletics. Especially in our world as it pertains to football, a lot of moving pieces, a lot of things for players to deal with and their families to deal with.

But my experience is this; that it still gets back to playing the game. If you have players that really love the game, love the work that goes into it and are focused on improvement and truly like working with other people, which in football it's the ultimate team game -- the more of those players that you get, the better off you're going to be. That's really kind of been the way we look at it.

I'll just close by saying for all of us here, I'm sure every coach, every player that you've had a chance to interface, I think all of us just feel very honored to be in a great conference and see it as a privilege as well to play in the Big Ten. To coach in the Big Ten is a really unique opportunity. I think we're all fortunate of that and looking forward to getting started. It should be a really exciting year this coming season.

I'll throw it out for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Coach Ferentz, with the House settlement setting the stage for direct revenue sharing, there's concern among some coaches about sustainability for the non-blue blood programs. From your perspective at Iowa, do you believe this model creates a long-term competitive imbalance, or is there still a path for developmental programs to succeed?

KIRK FERENTZ: I think -- I assume you're referring to the way the model stands right now. I think it's a positive step. What we've gone through the last couple of years has been tough to navigate, quite frankly. The world we've been living in I think would lead to what you're suggesting.

I view this as a positive right now. Not everybody is maybe going to be able to get to that 20.5 number. There's

always been some inequality in college athletics across the board. Everybody has an opportunity to get to that number. If we can keep it there and keep the NIL deals within reason and actually being justified, I think that would be really healthy for our sport because the way we've been going, I worry about the sustainability about that.

After spending six years in the National Football League where contracts are contracts and where there are salary caps, there's minimums and maximums, to me that's the ultimate league. I know we're not a professional operation, but hopefully we can find some balance where everybody does have an opportunity to be successful and it's just not a matter of haves and have-nots.

Q. Two-fold: Did you ever think you'd be in Iowa City for 27 years? Second-fold, friends with Coach Stig. Wondering about Mark Gronowski, your new quarterback, what he's brought to the team so far with his leadership and, of course, winning a title a couple of years ago?

KIRK FERENTZ: Actually, it's 36 years in Iowa, and I've been there two times. The last part maybe not as surprising other than we were 1-10 and 2-18 our first 20 games. Yeah, the odds were probably against 20-plus years at that point.

Full disclosure, 1981 I grew up in Pittsburgh, and Pittsburgh is -- at least Iowa is fairly provincial in my thinking. I had to look on a map to find out where Iowa was. I thought Chicago was the end of civilization as we knew it.

The second question is what would you do in Iowa? My wife and I have lived there 36 years, so it's a great place. Just unbelievable, and just really happy to be there. It's been a great place to work and be part of a great program.

As far as Mark Gronowski, still haven't seen him compete live. We haven't had a chance to see him live in practice. After being around him for seven-plus months, just a tremendous young person. Just a really impressive young man. Did a great job in the classroom at South Dakota State.

Obviously did a great job on the field. And all the things that we thought were positives about him, we've gotten to see them firsthand. He's been a great addition to our football team. Really looking forward to seeing him being in the huddle and actually take snaps with our team.

Q. You have to replace one of your all-time leading tacklers and players in Jay Higgins. What's the impact that he's had on that linebacker room that you've seen

this offseason?

KIRK FERENTZ: Yeah, Jay -- we just talked about the changes in college athletics. Jay is a good -- a great illustration of what I talked about, us being a developmental program.

To me he's everything that's great about college athletics. He also played behind a really good linebacker, and we were all worrying a couple of years ago, what are we going to do to replace Jack Campbell? The answer was Jay Higgins. Jay stepped in and did a great job. He's not a first-round draft pick physically, but he's a first-round college football player.

His production exceeded Jack's, which is hard to do. His leadership level was every bit that of Jack. To me the greatest thing about Jay was instead of running to a different place because he was playing behind a really good player, he played behind him, he learned from Jack, and learned from other people. When he got his opportunity, he really flourished. I think that's what's fun about collegiate athletics.

To see a guy -- a story like that and a person like Jay. He's with the Ravens now. He didn't go in as a draft pick, but wouldn't rule him out. I wouldn't rule Jay out in anything he does. Tremendous human being. Just a great guy.

Q. You began by talking about the change that you've seen since being in the Big Ten. A lot of Big Ten coaches have been embracing social media. I just wanted to ask, how is Iowa utilizing it?

KIRK FERENTZ: We're utilizing it. I couldn't tell you how to get there, but we're utilizing it. We have a couple of members of our staff here with us on this trip. I have no interest or really curiosity regarding it at all, but I do realize it's a big part of what we do. It's a big part of life today. I get all that.

So, you know, I probably would describe it this way. When we started 20-some years ago, we went in our staff room. There are X amount of people. That's probably grown by two. We've got a lot of people on the outer wall now. If you had told me in 1999 we were going to have a social media department, I would have looked at you a little bit funny about that.

It's part of the -- one more illustration of how things have changed. We have great people working on that. They're great young guys, and they're as invested in our program as anybody in the program. So I appreciate what they do, all of their efforts, and it's just part of today's world, so embrace it or not.

Q. Was curious at quarterback beyond Mark, with Hank, Jeremy, Jackson, do you expect those three to be kind of competing through the two through four spots at quarterback? Or how do you feel like, at least entering fall camp, that quarterback competition kind of shakes out?

KIRK FERENTZ: Sure. A couple of thoughts on that. First of all, I mean, last couple of years a few track -- which I know you do -- you look at how that room in our offensive line has really been kind of the same journey, if you will. We've had a lot of injuries. Things happen that nobody could count on or anticipate coming.

I can't say enough about the way the guys have stepped in and done a great job. Last year we played with three quarterbacks. Found a way to win eight games and probably left some stuff out there.

Two years ago, won ten games, and that was not a strength, probably playing some guys that probably weren't ready to play at this level yet. It was a credit to those guys that went in there and allowed us to still have success and handling a tough circumstance.

I think we have an opportunity hopefully this year to put a guy out there maybe that's a little bit better equipped for it, has the experience and help him meet the challenge.

The bigger picture, I think the whole room right now is really an upgrade from what we've had the last two years. Time will tell. We'll figure out how we go along how that's going to work, but every position is up for grabs right now. We would anticipate Mark being our starter. If one of the other guys can beat him out, great.

In a perfect world, if we're lucky, kind of like the Jay Higgins thing, hopefully somebody on our roster right now will be able to take it if Mark is our starter, which I would anticipate, they'll be able to take the reins from him or we'll have a two-man -- healthy two-man competition a year from now.

In a perfect world our guys are coming up from within, but that's a perfect world, and certainly the world is not perfect. That's our plan. That's our hopes.

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