

4/10/2013: Kirk Ferentz/James Morris teleconference transcript (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Below are written transcripts of Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz and senior linebacker James Morris from Wednesday's Big Ten spring football teleconference:

Ferentz's opening statement:

"Certainly, it's always good to get back on the field and we've been out there now a couple of weeks and I've just been very impressed with the team's work ethic and their attitude. It has been very, very positive. We certainly have a long way to go, like most teams I'm sure. But it has been good to be out there and working."

On having Sunday's open practice in West Des Moines and whether the fan reaction to it signals it being a positive for his team:

"Well, yeah. I hope it is. I think we're all real excited about it, certainly. It's something that we kicked around during the out-of-season and just felt like it was really an opportunity for us to just maybe say 'Thank you' to the people out in Central Iowa and also from Western Iowa and even over in Nebraska that travel to Kinnick [Stadium] during the fall. You know, people have been great for as long as I can remember, supporting our program."

"So it's just a chance I think for us to say 'Thank you' and then also, it's a nice opportunity I think for our players just to break up the routine a little bit and you know,

instead of left-foot, right-foot, you know, break up the routine and I think they always enjoy the opportunity to play in front of fans. So it should be a great environment and we're really looking forward to it on Sunday."

On if he remembers the blocked FG by now-LBs coach LeVar Woods that led to Ferentz's first win at Iowa in 1999:

"Well yeah, because I'm not sure we would've won the game if it wasn't for that. We were hardly a prolific outfit at that point, but you know, it was the only game we won, against Northern Illinois. LeVar is just a tremendous person, first and foremost, and when we got here in '99, he was one of the guys that emerged as a strong leader. When you think about guys like LeVar and Kevin Kasper in that first group, they were seniors in 2000 and never got to play in a bowl game with us. But guys like that and you know, certainly, some other guys around the team like Aaron Kampman, etc.

"So LeVar is a great leader, a great player for us. I think he carved out a really nice career in the NFL for seven years and you know, we were just really excited to have him join the staff last year and you know, a big part of the reason LeVar was able to have a nice career in the National Football League was his commitment to special teams.

"Teaming him up with Chris White, I think, has been a real good match, and then Kelvin Bell, who was a former player for us as well and one of our grad assistants, those three guys are doing an awful lot of work in the special teams area and I've liked what I've seen so far this spring."

On how the three quarterbacks are shaping up and if anyone has emerged yet at the position:

"Yeah, we've only been on the field six times, so it's probably about right where we expected it. At this point, it's still a 3-horse race and you know, we really came into it with no preconceived notions. We've been rotating all three players

virtually in every couple of snaps, so they work with the 1s, they work with the 2s and the 3s.

"You know, at this point, I think it's still just a jump-ball for all three guys, but I've been pleased with all three of them. They've been doing a lot of good things out there and they're doing some things that need to be worked on as well and that's probably what you'd expect at this point."

On how both interiors (O-Line and D-Line) are currently shaping up:

"You know, on the offensive line last year, we lose two pretty good players. Matt Tobin really did a nice job. He came here as a walk-on and played well for us two years ago and then last year, continued to improve. I know he did a good job. Unfortunately, he had to move out to left tackle when Brandon Scherff was injured and Matt really responded well. But I guess the good news with the injuries to Brandon and Andrew Donnal was that it created some opportunities for some other guys. So replacing Matt and then replacing James Ferentz, who has been a three-year starter.

"But I feel good about where we're at right now. I think we've got six, seven, eight guys that are competing pretty well and then another two guys underneath there that I think are going to be pretty good players. It's just a matter of how soon, so we're trying to push them along just a little bit.

"Defensive line, we lost two seniors on that side as well and we were a really young group last year, so I hope that will show up in a positive way for us this coming fall. So we should be a little bit more veteran on both sides and hopefully, that's something that works to our advantage."

On what his new assistants have brought to the program in terms of ideas and energy:

"You know, I think you look at each of the three and it's a

little different story with all three of them. You know, start with Bobby Kennedy. He worked with Greg [Davis] at Texas for 6-7 years together, so they have a relationship and great rapport and Bobby has familiarity with what Greg's looking for, so I think there has been some good dialogue there. Bobby is a high-energy coach. He has done a great job with the receivers. It's still a young group and I think they've responded well.

"If you move to Chris White, our most recent hire, Chris has done a good job with our backs and our backs are certainly further along than they were last year. You know last year at this time, we weren't sure what we had back there. I think we have a much better handle on that right now, so he has done a great job and I think he has also done a really nice job with our special teams thus far. He spent the last four years solely working on special teams, so I think there's some real upside there from that standpoint.

"And then on the other side, Jim Reid is a guy who is a veteran guy. I remember watching Jim coach as an assistant coach at UMass back in the late '70s when I was teaching school at Worcester Academy and it was the first time I met Jim. I was really impressed with him back then. He has done a lot of things since then. He has been a head coach, Division I-AA. He has coached in the National Football League and then most recently, the coordinator at Virginia.

"So he has got a real depth of experience, a lot of expertise and knowledge in a lot of different systems. He has really been a good veteran presence, I think, in that room and you know, if you look at our defensive side – both with Phil [Parker], Reese [Morgan] and LeVar; they were all in first-year positions, if you will, last year with new positions and new roles. So I think that experience has really added to things there.

"Things have come together. We've had a lot of transition now,

certainly, in the last 15-16 months, you know, but it has been fun to watch it all come together. I'm really pleased with the way the staff interacts and the way they're teaching and I think our players are responding in a real positive way."

On if he thought of any philosophical changes or anything else he does want to change moving forward during the offseason:

"Uh, yeah, I don't know how in-depth they are. But you know, the one obvious thing is we didn't play the way we like to play. I'm not sure we were playing always in a way that's representative of the way we'd like to play. There are exceptions to that, certainly."

"In the first half of the season, we did some good things and played real well in our first couple of Big Ten games. But for whatever reason, we kind of fell off after that and you know, there were some different factors involved, injury being one of them, but the bottom line is we just didn't get it done the way we wanted to."

"The one good thing, I said this afterwards that when you think about going 4-8, if there is anything good about that, there's no passing the buck. There's no sticking your head in the sand, you know, a play here, a play there. We have to do a better job in all areas and that starts with me. So it's just where it is."

"All that being said, it wasn't much fun, but we're excited about what's in front of us right now and the last time we were in this situation, we had two really good years that followed. But that's not just going to happen because it happened a couple of years ago. We're going to have to make it happen and that's the fun of this whole thing."

On how he'd explain the mix of playing well along the offensive line both physically and mentally:

"You know, it probably just depends on the individual. It is a

position that typically takes a little longer for guys to, you know I don't want to say master because I don't think you ever master it, but it takes a little bit longer typically for guys to play proficiently in the offensive line.

"I would compare that to the quarterback position. Those are usually the two areas that take a little bit longer. But it also depends on what you're doing offensively and there are so many styles of play right now in college football. But in general terms, I think it is one of those positions where there's a mix. You're on the right track there, and really, both of them are very important.

"It's hard to be good physically if you don't know what you're doing mentally and conversely, the other way, you know what to do but if you can't execute what's being asked of you, that's not getting the job done either. I don't think it's quite to the extent of playing quarterback, but it's closer to that class I guess in terms of the degree of difficulty and what it takes in terms of proficiency in both of those areas you're alluding to."

On how the tight end position has changed and whether Iowa is looking at it differently now than five years ago:

"Uh you know, I guess yes and no is my answer to the question. I think, you know, there's no question that people in the NFL are ... I think smart people have always valued that position and you know, I guess maybe you're seeing the tight ends a little bit more involved in the passing game.

"But if you go back to the '90s, the best teams in the NFL in the '90s, you look at Dallas with [Jay] Novacek and Denver with [Shannon] Sharpe, those guys weren't necessarily knock-back type blockers, but they were guys that were proficient blocking and effective, but not necessarily the big, physical guys. But they gave you something in the passing game that people always had to respect.

"Now you look at some of the guys in the NFL right now and we had Dallas Clark come out of here 10 years ago and he has had a really nice career. So it's constantly evolving. But I think again, in college football, it's interesting this year. It's a big year in the draft for tight ends."

"But over the last decade, there haven't been a lot of tight ends playing college football because a lot of people have moved away from that position and typically playing with more of a big receiver-type guy in that spot or flexing them out. Again, there's such variety in college football right now that it's hard to really put it in one small box."

Morris' opening statement:

"Spring, so far, is going well. We're pretty much healthy across the board, or about as much as you'd expect to be. We're about seven practices in, have one today. We're still kind of ironing the kinks out, shaking the rust off, but the energy's good and I like where we are as a defense."

On the play of fellow senior linebacker Anthony Hitchens:

"Anthony was a first-year starter last year, but he's a guy that has kind of played intermediately for two years before. Really throughout his career, he has kind of moved around. First he was a safety and they moved him to running back. Then the next thing you know, through strength training or whatever, he kind of blew up and he was a 220-pound linebacker."

"So they moved him to linebacker and since then, he has really come into his own. He's a good player. A really instinctive player. Very athletic. The thing he does best is make plays in space. He's a big hitter and he's becoming more and more of a leader for our team every day, so he has practiced well and is going to continue to do so. I anticipate big things for him this fall."

On whether he feels Iowa is now back to having the type of success it has had recently at linebacker with guys like himself entering their senior year:

"Um, I feel like maybe we have an opportunity to have some of that success. I'm certainly not going to say we're there yet. I'm not the person to ask for that. You know, I like the group we have and I think we have an opportunity to be successful, but none of that is certain. I mean, we've got to make it happen. So, that's what we're trying to work on this spring and hopefully the results will be there in the fall."

On if he's glad about having the opportunity to have an open practice somewhere besides Iowa City this Sunday:

"Yeah, sure. I mean, even for us, you know, it's just something to break the monotony of spring ball. You know, I think people get in a routine and you know, this will be something different and a chance for us to be in a different environment and be around a lot of fans that either don't get to go to games in the fall or maybe this is one of the few opportunities that they would have to see the team practice."

"There's a lot of Iowa fans out in West Des Moines and that area, so it's exciting for us to obviously go do something new and also maybe give a little bit back to those fans that aren't able to participate in the fall."

On what he's seeing out of the D-Line, and in particular, from tackle Louis Trinca-Pasat:

"Louis had surgery at the end of the year, so he hasn't been practicing. He has just been trying to come back from an injury. I think, I'm not a doctor, but we're anticipating that he's going to be back and at full speed by the time fall camp comes around."

"But regarding Louis' play last fall, I can say that it wasn't a surprise to anybody in Iowa City or anybody on our staff."

Louis is a guy that has been working really hard and he really improved just in the last 365 days. I mean, just a total flip from the player he was to the player he is now, so that's exciting for us.

"We also have had a lot of guys that have been really practicing well, just really a couple of days into spring ball. Two guys, well, four I guess – Drew Ott, he has been playing really well. He was a true freshman last year and he'll be a sophomore next year. Mike Hardy is a guy that's really coming on. He was sort of a late-bloomer, so to speak. And then Carl Davis is another guy that, he battled some injuries, but right now, he's really playing at a high level and if we can just get him to be really consistent, I think he can be a good player. And then Dom Alvis is another guy, he's a fifth-year senior who has battled some injuries. But I think he likes where he is physically right now and that has been showing on the practice tape."

On what 2-3 things need to improve most defensively in order for success to happen this fall:

"You know, I think the biggest thing is consistency. We do things well. You know, we play zone on defense extremely well and I don't know what it is about our mindset that makes us more proficient there than in the open field. But I think if we can kind of channel some of that attitude or some of that approach to everything we do on defense, I think we're going to be more successful and then also, I think that maybe as players, more on-field communication and football IQ needs to improve if we expect to be better and that's something that has been improving.

"I would say we're better now than we were in the fall and that has been an area of emphasis for the coaches and some of the veteran players to try and improve that culture and that intelligence, that awareness. Because we know that we're going to need it if we're going to be able to win in the Big Ten

today with some of the offenses being what they are.

"You know, there's really not a lot of time in between plays, so the smarter you can be and the headier you can be in-between plays, before plays, after the plays, I think that's going to help you be more successful and that's what we're trying to develop with all 11 guys."

On what mark his class has made at Iowa so far and what kind of mark he wants to leave as a senior this coming season:

"You know, that's a good question. I think you know, if we're being really honest, the mark we've left so far if we're being completely honest and objective here, I don't think we can say it's a good one or a particularly strong one. That's just being brutally honest and I don't like that."

"I mean, we were 8-5 my freshman year and my class had very little impact on that. I mean, some, but it's hard to argue that we made a significant impact. And then the year after, we were 7-6, which wasn't what we wanted. And then this last year, we were 4-8. So, I'm not happy about it, if we're being honest. But I am excited that we've got one more opportunity to change things and that's what we're really focused on, what we can do to get this thing turned around and really kind of leave a legacy here, leave some mark that we're proud of."

"That's my goal and that's the goal of a lot of my teammates right now, is to leave something that we can be proud of and the fans can be proud of, so when you look back, you can say, 'Hey, you know what? The first part wasn't what we wanted, but we got this thing straightened out.'"