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An interview with:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome. Injury-wise we're gaining ground right now. Probably the biggest variables if Kennan Davis is back, he'll work some today. He's improving. It's just a matter of where he's at in the progression of things. Kind of like a couple of guys that we've had. I think all the rest of the guys have a chance to be involved. That's good certainly.

Captain-wise we have the four same guys. Tyler Nielsen, Mike Daniels defensively, Marv McNutt and James Vandenberg offensively.

Obviously it was a tough loss this past weekend. We went back to work on Sunday. Now our focus turns to Michigan who has an excellent football team. They're a one-loss football team. Anytime you play Michigan it's a general statement they've got excellent players, they're very well-coached. Obviously they're having a lot of success right now in all three areas. They've really played well in all three areas, all three phases.

It's going to be a real stiff challenge for our football team. Certainly good to be back home. That's always a good thing no matter what time of year it is. Moving forward our focus is on improvement. We got plenty of things to concentrate on. We'll start that up this afternoon.

Q. Given the numbers defensively, now that it's November, is there anything you can do to shore that stuff up or is it too late?

COACH FERENTZ: I hope it's not. Every week we try to improve. True in all phases, I guess. I think I've said a couple times I think still the number one focus will be on stopping the run. The bad news there is that Michigan is running for about 250 a game. They probably could go 400 if

they chose to. They're a very good running football team with a lot of good players touching the football. It's going to be a big challenge.

We're going to go back to work today. I don't think it's a lost cause if that's what you're asking. We haven't surrendered yet. We don't plan on surrendering.

Q. Is it a personnel thing against the run, a schematic thing? What have you noticed?

COACH FERENTZ: I've noticed we're not getting it done. Simple as that. We just have to play better. There's a lot of factors involved, personnel, injuries, scheme. That's like any phase of football right now, we'll just continue to work. We've had success in the past and we'll continue to work for that in the future.

Q. Are the defensive linemen hard to recruit or do you focus more on trying to build them when they're here?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, I'm going way back to the '80s. To find dominant defensive linemen coming out of high school, I remember a coach in the Big-8 at that time saying it's like finding a 7-footer in basketball, there aren't a lot of them around. It's like several other positions. Typically those guys go to other schools.

If you look historically here, we've probably got as many. I don't know what the official count is. Our guys upstairs can tell you. We've had as many guys go to the NFL and play successfully on the defensive line. Some came here as defensive linemen. Colin Cole that we recruited when we were 1-10 or going into a 1-10 year. We've had other guys like Aaron Kampman, a middle linebacker. You go right down the list. It's like our whole football team, it's a mix of both.

But it's no question, it's a challenging position to be good at. Yeah, we're just going to keep working. We have some good defensive

linemen on our team right now. But we're just going to keep working. It's not just the defensive line. It would be easy to say it's just that or this. It's a team thing.

Q. You put a lot on the defensive line with stopping the run and pressuring the quarterback. What's happened to the depth there?

COACH FERENTZ: Analogy, last year we came in with the same situation with the offensive line. I've said all this before. I'll repeat it again. '08, '09, we graduated some good offensive linemen. You can check the books on that one. Last year we went in with Julian Vandervelde and Riley Reiff. Riley played 11 games as a redshirt freshmen. Julian played since '07 I believe. We had three our guys that were project guys, if you will, undersized, out of high school. Did a formidable job last year.

I think we're in a similar situation this year with Broderick Binns and Mike Daniels. Injuries do impede progress. We've had some of that. Not just the defensive front, but linebackers. Linebackers are important to run stopping, too. That's what it is. It's all a matter of record. We're just going to keep working. The cavalry is not coming. We're not going out and picking up any free agents. Nobody is graduating midterm and coming in to help us, so we're just going to keep playing.

Q. What are the D-linemen not doing schematically?

COACH FERENTZ: I think I kind of answered that question. It's more than just the defensive line. It's the defensive line, it's the secondary at times, it's the linebackers. It's like any phase of offense or defense, to stop the run you need all 11 guys. In the particular defense called, they all have a role to do. If we do that well, we stop the run. When we don't, we don't.

It's a team thing. It's not just the defensive line.

Q. It's the fans' perception that they know you have a young defensive line. Still Iowa is Iowa. It should be able to beat Minnesota. How would you respond to that?

COACH FERENTZ: To which part of the question?

Q. To the fact that Iowa is Iowa, they're better players.

COACH FERENTZ: We graduated three guys to the NFL, which is really an uncommon occurrence for anybody. Three out of four guys go to the NFL and make teams. That's uncommon. I remember in '83, my two-deep offensive line, we had seven seniors. The good news in '83, those guys were pretty good. In '84 we had three guys in the two-deep, none had started, and seven other guys.

We still had a successful football team, that's college football. In those unusual years where you're top-heavy with seniors, it's not often you're going to get 75% of your linemen go to the NFL.

Second part of the question. If you look at college football, we talked about this a week ago, probably eight or nine days, a vivid example. There's a team in the Big 12 that went to a pretty prestigious place, beat a team that had a long win streak, beat them in their stadium. I think they were 29-and-a-half point underdogs. I did look it up. That's something we talked about. That's exemplary of college football.

The team we lost to this past weekend had a couple tough outings. They also lost to Southern Cal by two points at the Coliseum. Southern Cal played Stanford into overtime. If you pay attention to what's going on in the landscape of things, I'm not making any excuses, but that's football. As much as we all want to know what's going to happen before things happen, that's why you play games.

I think any of the fans that bet on games probably lost a lot of money in the St. Louis/New Orleans game. I went and got a cup of coffee and heard that score Sunday. That's football. That's what makes it interesting. When you're on the short end of any game, it's not any fun, I can tell you that.

Q. Can you understand the fans' frustration?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm more focused on the players' frustration and their feelings, quite frankly. That is who I really care about the most. I don't mean to sound callous. My number one responsibility is how our players are feeling and how they're reacting to things and responding to things. That's number one.

That being said, we don't ever want to disappoint our fans. We appreciate our fans. Nobody's got better fans than us, home or away. I

appreciate fans being up there and supporting us the other day. I appreciate our fans coming into Kinnick. That's sincere and genuine. We've got just great, great fans and I appreciate that.

The people that are pulling for us, I'm sure they're all dying a thousand deaths, just like we do. It's tough to lose.

Q. How do you channel that frustration from the players into motivation?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if it's frustration. I think it was disappointment on our part. If you want me to pinpoint one feeling we had on Saturday, it's disappointment. It's disappointing to lose. That's life. You get back up and go back to work the next day.

Q. You said it wasn't just the defensive line. The secondary, they're down towards the bottom in statistics as well. Does that surprise you?

COACH FERENTZ: The secondary is?

Q. Pass defense.

COACH FERENTZ: I'm going back to a year ago. It's usually a team thing. The line affects the secondary, pass coverage, vice versa. Everything goes together, at least the way we play. We have 11 guys that have to play together in the scheme. If they're doing that, it's a good thing. We haven't gotten it done. That's a matter of record, not well enough to win.

The one thing we've been doing well is playing well in the red zone offensively and defensively. If you wanted to point one thing out on Saturday where we dropped the ball, that was it. We came up short three times and they stuck it in there three times. That's a big part of the game.

Q. Back to Michigan. New coaching staff, they seem to be playing much better defensively. When you look at the film, what do you see that they hadn't been doing in years past?

COACH FERENTZ: I think the biggest thing, just like you look at every game independently, whatever, this is a new season. They run a scheme. I think all schemes, you can have success out of any scheme you run. It's just a matter of the players fitting in. Kind of what we've been talking about here for the last 10 minutes. It's how the 11 guys react within the scheme.

The two things about Michigan I would tell you, they have excellent players on the defensive side at all positions and it's very clear they're pretty clear on what they're doing. There are a couple exceptions to that. That's more early in the season. You got a new staff.

They're on the same page, they're playing well, they're playing aggressively. They're doing a great job. Greg Mattison I think is a guy we all are familiar with. Just mentioned on the teleconference, Greg is fourth in that family. His wife and son Brian and daughter are all stellar people. Greg is kind of living off their reputations. But he's an excellent coach. He's done a great job there. That's no surprise. He's done a good job everywhere he's been.

Q. Players fitting schemes. When you have so many injuries that you have at linebacker, the defensive line, do you worry about players fitting the scheme what you want to do on defense?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it makes it more of a challenge. We went through that challenge last year at the linebacker spot. We were always a guy short. We lost (indiscernible) early. We were getting along. Then you lose Tyler Nielson.

I'm not sitting here making excuse. That's a reality. You lose two of your players on defense, it might affect things. It showed up several times last year.

Tom Nardo was Big Ten Player of the Week. He's been out with a sprained ankle. Not that he's going to save our team, but you take enough hits, we've had injury issues at linebacker. All those things make it a more complex equation. You go from algebra one to calculus two. Those are the things you deal with.

But everybody's got issues with that, everybody in college football. Some years are easier than others. You work with them. The good news is guys are moving back to being healthy. Will that help us? I can't guarantee it. It's not going to hurt us.

We'll go back to work today. We're not going to come out with a new front, we're not going to one-gap it and play Tampa two. We're going to play defense and see what happens.

Q. Why do you think in recent years your teams have played up to and down to the level of competition?

COACH FERENTZ: I'd have to sit back and think about that. I'm not even sure that's totally accurate. I'd have to sit back and think about that one.

Do you have a specific question there or not?

Q. It's always a close game. A lot of fans knew going into Minnesota it would probably be a close game. I think a lot of fans think this game against Michigan will be a close game.

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if this one is going to be close. We're going to have to make it close because these guys are awfully good.

You just triggered one thing. We lost to Penn State by 10 which is the biggest margin of defeat in three years, three and a half years. Yeah, we've been in close games, that's accurate. I can't tell you why we play well enough to win sometimes and not well enough to win other times. If I knew that, I'd probably be a little smarter. But we're working on that.

Q. Does it look like Michigan has settled in on this running back?

COACH FERENTZ: All the running backs are really good. This guy is really good. He's not the biggest guy in the world, but he runs really tough. He's very athletic. They have a lot of guys that move around. Robinson is a pretty good running back, too. Happens to throw it too, unfortunately. They'll use him back there with their younger kid playing quarterback. They got a lot of guys that can hurt you. They're a pretty athletic group.

Q. Is the Morris/Nielsen switch permanently and was it because of the injuries?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we've had a revolving door there. Hitchens got in the act with an injury to make it even more interesting.

I think at least going into this week, what you saw on the chart we released is what we plan on doing. Tyler will play in the middle, James and Kirksey on the outside, go from there.

Q. You're unbeaten at home, winless on the road. What makes the road that much harder?

COACH FERENTZ: We just haven't played well enough to win on the road. I don't

think there's anything mystical or magical about it. Haven't played well enough on the road. Three different scenarios. Contain was an issue Game 1 and Game 3. Certainly I'm more focused on that than I am the location of the game. More we got to contain the football in critical situations. If we don't do it this week, it will be bad, too.

Q. How has the Michigan offense changed since the last time you played them?

COACH FERENTZ: Not a lot. There are some changes. I don't mean to minimize it. The worst thing we've done the last two years is bump their quarterbacks out of the game. It seems like we're playing okay, then there's a switch. Got interesting.

But Robinson is just playing with more confidence. He's a much better player than he was a year ago. Not that he was bad a year ago. I'm not suggesting that. He's a year further into his development. Got a good supporting cast. Got a good offensive line, as good as we've seen this year. They're well pieced together.

I think they're comfortable with what they're doing. They've got a lot of good players executing well out there.

Q. Talk about special teams. Are there red flags after Saturday? I'm sure there are.

COACH FERENTZ: I don't see it quite the same way. The comparison I would make, I feel a little bit about your special teams, our red zone offense and defense have been good. Saturday clearly not good enough to win. On special teams we're actually gaining ground. Yet special teams play, we didn't get what we needed out of special teams, if that makes any sense.

The root of the cause is I'm not overly concerned about. I think there are things that certainly can be addressed. Mike Meyer is a good kicker. He's a good kicker. We all have games like that. The best miss 'em. Things like that happen. He's not the best yet. But he's got a chance to be a really good player here.

He's going to work through that. The on-side kick, you know, I'll take that one. How is that? Just as soon as he started making his approach, I almost called timeout. I'm standing next to an official. I should have in retrospect, but I didn't. So that's the way it goes.

Q. Are special teams, the way you guys

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are thinking about it, vulnerable? Surprise punt last year.

COACH FERENTZ: Fake punt. I'll take that one, too. That one I should have had.

Q. Are you vulnerable there?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I don't think so. I think we're gaining ground quite frankly. That's one of the things I'm optimistic about. I think we're gaining ground.

Q. When you look at Micah as a punt returner, is he too timid back there? Seems to step away sometimes.

COACH FERENTZ: I wouldn't say he's a hundred percent comfortable yet. The other thing I'd say about that, the biggest thing that's changed in my mind, the way people punt now, things have changed over the course of years. It's really getting tougher and tougher to return punts just because it's kind of shotgun punting quite a bit, what have you.

The first one their guy hit the other day went a little further than we had seen, expected, anticipated. Looking on tape, Where did that come from? Those things happen, too. He's not a hundred percent comfortable back there, but he'll be fine.

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