

September 22, 2009



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Sorry for the delay. The Penn State writers kept me on the phone for a little bit, and I put our two-deep sheet down somewhere and can't find it in the wastebasket, laundry basket, so I'm hoping Norm grabbed it, but we'll find out. Either that or I'm certified off the edge here.

But just real quickly, we're certainly happy about the last week and pleased for Ryan Donahue to be recognized, Big Ten special teams player of the week. He's really been performing well all last season and had three good games so far. Happy for that, certainly.

Injury-wise, we're still day-to-day with the three guys on offense: Tony, Bryan Bulaga and Derrell, and then Greg Castillo I think is moving in the right direction. I'm pretty confident he'll practice today. So we'll just kind of see how that goes.

We're playing a very tough football team this week. I think everybody is excited about starting conference play. Playing a very tough football team in Penn State and then playing in a very tough place. Any time of day it's a tough place, and I'm guessing at night it might be even a little bit more hostile and more of a challenge. Just in case we need a little bit more degree of difficulty, we have that, too.

We need a big week of preparation here, and hopefully we'll play our best football this coming Saturday.

Q. Have you already talked to your team about the revenge factor that Penn State is obviously going to be looking at for this game?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think that's probably true -- you could probably say that any time anybody loses a game. We could say it at the same time we lose a game, too. I've read a lot about it, some of their players have talked about it, and I think that's natural.

You know, I'm sure they're going to want to win the football game. My guess if they had beaten us last year, if we had missed that field goal, they'd still want to beat us. I don't think that's going to be a huge factor.

Q. Over these past two games, the defensive allowed just one touchdown. How happy are you with how they've progressed so well?

COACH FERENTZ: We're playing better. That's one thing Saturday, I thought we played better on defense for sure. It started up front. I thought we looked a little bit more aggressive with our front four, and that's a good thing, because again, the way we play defense it's important that we're doing a good job in that front line. So that's a positive.

And then flipping it around, we've got a heck of a challenge ahead of us because really this team that we're playing moved the ball as easy on us last year as anybody we played, and they really sliced us up pretty good; especially in the first half, they went right through us.

We improved last week, and we're going to have to probably take another two steps this week to have another chance.

Q. You've had a lot of success at Penn State. Do you think there's a special reason for that?

COACH FERENTZ: I've got a short memory. That last trip over there wasn't so pretty. We got spanked pretty good. But you know, it's really true in this whole series, and it's probably a generalization, but if you're going to play well

against Penn State, you'd better play your best football. When we've done that, we've been competitive, and when we haven't, like two years ago, or in '99 -- well, '99 I wouldn't say we were playing as hard as we could play. But two years ago we got handled pretty easily over there.

If you're not playing your best football, that can happen pretty easily. It seemed like we were going uphill all day long, and we're going to have to take another couple steps here to play well against this team.

Q. Riley Reiff kind of progressing? Even from one week to the next it looks like he's even playing better?

COACH FERENTZ: He played better and had to because he played against a very good player. That player was an all-Pac-10 player, really, the defensive end, and I thought Riley met the challenge. He's a young guy right now so he's got a lot of work to do. So does Bryan, whenever we get him back. He's got a lot of work to do, too, technique-wise and that type of thing. That's true of all football players. That starts with competing, and Riley is not afraid of competing.

Q. His size, how does he kind of compensate with that?

COACH FERENTZ: In the old days he would be just fine. I guess not by today's standards. He's 280, 285, and he's a strong guy, and there's no fat on him. He's a good-looking guy. So it's not like he's -- he's not anemic out there, and he'll hold his own. He's a tough player. He's competitive.

Q. You had three guys not practice on Sunday --

COACH FERENTZ: No. Let me think about this for a minute. They all did some stuff, but not full speed. I don't know how optimistic I am, quite frankly.

Q. How frustrating is it, the day-to-day nature of those injuries? Would it be less upsetting if you just knew they were out?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes and no. That's the nature of injuries, so you just kind of go with it. I think clearly they weren't there Saturday, and I think once that's been determined, then you just get the mindset that they're not going to be there, and if they're there, that's a bonus. That's always nice.

But we haven't had any Christmas presents yet this year. So we'll just kind of play it like they're not going to be with us.

Q. They sent out releases regarding their team linebackers saying they were day-to-day, as well. Do you anticipate both Lee and Bowman playing on Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: Bowman's situation sounds like maybe a couple things that we've dealt with, and those are tricky, hard to predict. So it's kind of like some of our guys; they might make it, they might not.

Sean Lee's situation, I'm not as knowledgeable of. But I know this, both those guys are great players, and if they can play, they're going to play. Same with our guys, if they can play, they'll play. It's part of football. It's unfortunate, and you've just got to keep looking forward if guys can't go.

Q. Injuries are always something you guys have to deal with every year. Something you always preach is next man in. How are some of these guys like Allen, Riley, somebody in that receiving corps, maybe Paul Chaney, Jr., how are they embracing that?

COACH FERENTZ: If there's any good news here, I started talking about Reisner back in the spring. I think I said he had a really good spring. He really looked good in camp. He's at a point now where I think he's a very confident player and a good football player. What it really means is when Tony is not out there -- when he is out there, we have two pretty good tight ends; when he's not, we have one. But he'll do just fine. Allen has made big plays for us already this year, and he'll continue to do so.

Riley is a little bit younger and he's working on getting some good on-the-job training here, and his degree of difficulty will go up a little bit this week, too, just like it did last week. But he's responsive, and he's a tough guy. We felt good about him last spring, and he's got good mental toughness, so he'll weather it.

And I think outside, all of our receivers are continuing to progress. We've been a young group outside of Andy Brodell last year, and I think some of the maturation that you hope to see is starting to take place, and that's been a positive, not only with Paul but Marv McNutt made some plays the other day and Trey did some good things for us. Those

are all positives. It's how a football team has got to work if you're going to have a chance. And some years are better than others.

Last year, particularly on offense, we just kind of skated right through there. Seth Olsen was our big issue up front. I think we missed him for like three games. This was his come-back-out game. But outside of that, I'll tell you, we were pretty much in a groove. Some years are like that and some aren't, and this one has kind of been a scatter drill since the start of camp, which is the way it goes sometimes. It's not much fun.

Q. Reisner, he's a real natural at catching the ball. Is that something you've had to work on, or take me through his progression of how he's improved as a player?

COACH FERENTZ: I think his ball skills have been pretty good from day one, not the same as but sort of like Brandon Myer's. What he had to work on was the maturation part and blocking. I think that's usually one of the biggest challenges for any tight end, particularly guys that have some skill in the passing game.

Like I said, they could have thrown us in jail three years ago for child abuse, but we had nobody else when we threw him out on the field, I think it was the Illinois game. I swear he looked like he was 15 out there in his helmet. But we were kind of out of players, so sorry about that, Al.

But I think to his credit, he's a young guy, but he has good mental toughness, and he made that experience work for him, and he made some plays for us two years ago, and he played better last year. I think now he's really enjoying the game because he has the ability to play and do all the things we ask our tight ends to do. It's a lot more fun when you're better equipped to handle the challenge.

Q. Do you think that you can simulate in practice the kind of atmosphere, what the surroundings might be, whether it's turn on music really, really loud and try to call out signals?

COACH FERENTZ: That's part of our routine, at home or away, we just do it on Wednesdays, particularly for the offense. I'm not as worried about the defense. But it's not as big a factor, I should say, for the defense for obvious reasons. It's really more a factor at home for our defense. So they're used to kind of communicating visually. Yeah, we do it every Wednesday, home or away, just to get the guys used to it.



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And I think we just started that a year ago maybe. For a long time I just thought that was all garbage. We used to do it in the '80s, and we did it when I was in the NFL. I thought it was kind of over-hyped, but last year I figured we'd give it a shot. It's part of our routine. I don't know if it helps or not. If they think it helps, then it helps; that's good.

Q. Do guys kind of nonverbal through their checks?

COACH FERENTZ: It's pretty hard to hear anything when we have the music piped up and the crowd noise. Although up on the line usually they can hear a little bit if the quarterback bends down and yells, but out on the perimeter you can't hear a thing. That's how it'll be Saturday.

Q. What music do you play at practice?

COACH FERENTZ: Paul is in charge of that. We've got a little bit of everything going. Some stuff I've never heard and some stuff I have. We piped in some crowd noise last week. I think it was an Australian football game or soccer game from Denmark or something like that. It sounded like a foreign crowd.

Q. Does Penn State this year look like Penn State every other year --

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, unfortunately they do. They've got a good football team. I know the quarterback at Ohio State has gotten a lot of attention, and rightfully so, but Daryll Clark is a veteran guy who's played in a lot of big games and done a great job. Royster is as good a running back as you're going to find anywhere. He's excellent. They've always got good linemen. They've got veteran tight ends. Young at receiver in terms of experience. You know, they graduated three guys that seemed like they played forever, but they've got good receivers like you'd expect.

Defensively we already talked about two of the best linebackers in college football. Two interior players are veteran guys that are very, very tough to block. They've been playing three straight years. I think this is the third straight year. Young guys outside, but they're big, physical guys that are good athletes. And their secondary is young in terms of experience, but they're talented, too.

There's a reason they're ranked in the top five, fourth and fifth I think it is right now. We're playing a really good football team, and they've got

a tradition of kickers, and it seems like that's going strong, too. They've got good kicking.

Q. Your defense has seemed pretty solid. What's going to be the difference-maker for one offense or another to break through and be able to move the ball?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it's going to be tough moving the ball on our part, and hopefully it will be for them. They've got a little bit more maybe experience, and more play makers offensively. We've just got to try to slow them down a little bit.

Again, we had a hard time doing that, in the first half last year, especially. They were up and down the field on us, and that concerns you a little bit. So we're going to have to make the most of our opportunities. It's like any game when you're an underdog, you've just got to play your absolute best, hopefully minimize your critical mistakes, and if you get some opportunities, you've got to cash in, even though they're going to be few and far between. But we've got to try to be ready to go when they show up.

Q. You move guys around and try them at different positions from time to time. Is it more difficult to move a quarterback to receiver than it is a tight end or linebacker as far as changing positions goes?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know, it seems like we've got a couple quarterbacks out there -- Chaney was a high school quarterback, Marvin, Hinkel was. I'm missing somebody in our group right now. Was there somebody else? We had Derrell, and the kid from Kent State. I don't know how many balls he caught against the Jets the other day, Edelman. He made a bunch because whatchamacallit was out.

If guys are good athletes, you hope they can -- but it takes time, and Marvin is a good illustration, and we've talked about that before. It's just last year was not the best time to do it. We did it in season, and he was just kind of gathering, learning what he could. But it does take time to develop into a good -- any position takes time and training and repetition. I think we're at least seeing some positives there.

Some positions are a little bit more natural than others, I guess, moving -- guys tend to move inside. The defensive guys tend to move to the offensive line, tight ends can move down inside of the offensive lineman, like Steinbach. So it just depends on the situation.



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Q. Your running back has kind of taken a different approach on the goal line this year. They've jumped over the pile. Was that Brandon's or Adam's group that was a little shaky there?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if it was follow-the-leader or what, but Brandon did it up at Iowa State two weeks ago, and then we saw them both do it the other day. I'm okay with that as long as it works. It takes a fearless guy to do that.

Q. Coach Paterno talked in a teleconference recently about sportsmanship and some things he saw, and I understand the NCAA sent out a recommendation to shake hands before the game. Has sportsmanship changed that much over the years, or is it media exposure that has brought things to light?

COACH FERENTZ: I mean, there's illustrations of bad sportsmanship I think probably from all decades. Most things that happen in sports, there's not a lot new. It's kind of like plays and styles of play. I don't think there's a lot of new inventions out there.

So I think there's probably ebb and flow. I think it's great for awareness. I think it's more important for how people conduct themselves. I think the proof is in the pudding, not so much talking about it.

I think that's one great thing about the Big Ten overall. There have been very few, that I'm aware of at least, incidents that have gone on that are really distasteful. I can't remember too many of them involving Big Ten teams, and hopefully it stays that way.

Q. Do you think that maybe last year's game was a bit of a turning point, or was that just the end result of a lot of hard work?

COACH FERENTZ: I mean, yes and yes probably. It was a turning point in the fact that we won that day and then we continued to win. I think we became a pretty good football team about that time last year. We were on the road to it, and that helped us. It was the first time we won a close game. I think you all are more aware of that statistic than I am, but we hadn't won a close game for a while. So that was significant. We won another close one the week after. So we got over that hurdle a little bit.

But every season, every team has got its own personality. It's cliché, but it is a journey. I mean, every step along the way is important, and how you respond to every step is important, too. We're much earlier in the season this year as opposed to last year, but this team, like last year's team, has been fun to work with. It's been very responsive. I think we've got great character on the team, got good leadership.

I think everybody is invested, and it's -- basically every day has been pretty enjoyable outside of the injuries. But that's part of football, and some years are better than others.

Q. Does it help that it is so early and you've already played a Big 12 team on the road in a rivalry game and played a Pac-10 team at home, and through three games, does that sort of help given the environment you're playing in Saturday night?

COACH FERENTZ: I think one of the things I was pleased with this past week is the score -- that was a tough football game. I mean, it was basically an even football game, and our guys really had to play hard each and every snap, and they had to respond to some things during the game. So it was a full day's work Saturday. I think that'll be good.

I don't know if they'll show up this week, but I think it's going to benefit us down the road certainly. You'd like to be able to come out of one of those and say, boy, we did a good job responding. I think our guys did on Saturday.

Q. What specific problems or challenges does Daryll Clark present that last year you were able to force him into his worst game?

COACH FERENTZ: It won't be easy. It isn't easy. We've talked about quarterbacks in the past. There's all kinds of different styles of quarterback, but some guys just kind of know how to play. It's like anything else, some guys just have a knack for winning, and that's Daryll Clark. There are games we saw him last year where he was involved in blowouts, and then there was the Ohio State game, which was a whole different kind of football game, but a great football game.

Some quarterbacks just have that ability of guiding their teams to victories, and he certainly seems very adept at that. He's a guy that can beat you at throwing the football, he can beat you with his feet, also, and with his head. He's a smart-headed guy out there.

Q. It seems the last two quarterbacks of opponents, the passing game, the numbers were pretty ugly. When you look at the tape what do you think the key is, I guess, to all that?

COACH FERENTZ: If we're playing well, and everybody is making a contribution, pressure up front is a big part of pass defense, not necessarily sacks, although those are great, but pressure up front is good. You have to have good underneath coverage, which is usually the linebackers. Linebackers are always involved in that and sometimes some of the guys in the secondary get involved there, too, and guys have to be protecting back deep, too.

It's just playing good team defense, and that's kind of how we're built. We need all 11 guys to be doing their job, and if we do that, when we do it well, we can be effective. But if one area drops off a little bit, usually it shows up.

Q. In three games Sash has four interceptions. There aren't a whole lot of sophomores with enough maturity that seem to know where a ball is going before it's thrown.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, some things you don't want to talk too much about, and that's probably one because we've got something good going there, and I don't want to jinx him. But he's really done a good job. He's really been opportunistic. A lot of that is being where he's supposed to be. It goes right back to the point we made a minute ago. A think two of those go off tips the other day, a week ago, ten days ago, and that's good team defense when balls are tipped, and hopefully your deep defenders are going to have an opportunity. They're looking at the ball and hopefully they can come up and get it.

Again, it's good team work. But there's no question he's a much more confident player than he was a year ago at that time or a year ago, period.

Q. Did you grow up a Penn State football fan?

COACH FERENTZ: I did. I did. My goal was to go there, probably like everybody in the state, and at that time, I'll just qualify it, when I was in high school, Pitt was Iowa. That's not a good analogy, but they were 1 and 10, I think 1 and 10 my senior year, and I went down and saw them

play at UCLA, and it was like 73 to 7 or something like that, or 77 to 3.

The next year is when Coach Majors came in. I was a senior.

Quick story for you. And that was the last year of NCAA limit on scholarships. I think they brought in like 90 freshmen and another 30 JC guys. They went to camp next year with 170 guys. They had to practice in shifts because they had so many guys there.

I think I was the only eligible senior in western Pennsylvania not to be offered to go to University of Pittsburgh that year. Everybody else, including Tony Dorsett, I can't believe they took him over me (laughter), so I was like the only senior to graduate that year that didn't get an offer from Pitt.

I just kept that, and it finally caught on somewhere like literally in July. Yeah, I was a fan. You had to be, because in Pennsylvania that was just kind of the deal, and they were playing great football back then, too; beat Texas in the Cotton Bowl and had some great teams, Orange Bowl, right on through.

Q. Talk about, you mentioned last week you didn't have a lot to say about the Arizona scheduling. How hard is it to schedule because both you and Penn State ran into a situation where you scheduled Syracuse and they're winning the Big East and then they come through and struggle, and you want to set up the schedule a certain way. How hard is it to plan and schedule ahead?

COACH FERENTZ: It is hard. It's becoming more difficult now, which again, goes back to the 12th game. I think we all understand why we're playing 12 games. I'll take another shot; I'll advocate for 13, keep that plug going.

But I think we all understand why we're playing 12, but what we didn't maybe foresee or envision was the difficulty of scheduling for 12, and it's become very, very difficult.

And then in terms of these long-term series, it's tough, because I'd prefer to be selective. I know going back several years, we had somebody scheduled, and they chose to back out of an agreement or not honor an agreement, however you want to phrase it, but they offered up an alternative for us, and it was a game up in the far northwest. I think it was still in America, but it was a team in the far northwest to play, which would have been fine if that team would have come here to play. But I'm not wild about jumping

on a plane and flying up to someplace we're never going to recruit and then having to fight time zone changes and all that stuff. So selfishly I think you'd rather stay closer to home.

But the Arizona thing makes sense to me because we have so many former lowans living down there. I understand that part of the equation, and I think that's good.

Q. Is there any way you can ask the Big Ten to stop scheduling you road games for the conference opener?

COACH FERENTZ: It seems to be a trend there, doesn't it? I don't know. I guess they like doing it. I don't know.

Q. As a coach, though --

COACH FERENTZ: I've heard it was a computer that does that. I'm not into probabilities, but if I was -- the good news is after that opening game, we have four out of seven at home. Once we get that first one done, we have the edge. We have the home field advantage the rest of the conference play.

Q. Is there any official way, any form you can fill out or a phone call that you can --

COACH FERENTZ: I asked a couple years ago. I don't know why, but I just got bored and asked, and I was told the computer handles the scheduling. We must not have enough -- what's the NBA do with that lottery deal, enough balls in the machine or whatever. We'll see if we can get a few more of those.

Q. Did you go to Penn State games as a kid, make a trip from where you were?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I was never there I don't think. I went up to the Michigan State game in whatever it was. I was putting bubble gum out there to see if people would step on it. I was pretty young at that time, pre-teenage years. They didn't recruit me. Can you imagine that? They didn't need a short, slow linebacker; I can't believe it.

Q. What does Penn State mean coming from where you grew up and just that part --

COACH FERENTZ: They've been a model program for a long time in my mind, and again, I grew up in that part of the country. At that time they were the program in the state of Pennsylvania, and really the program in the east at

that point. BC started getting good when Flutie showed up in the early '80s. Syracuse when I was in high school was struggling. Most of -- out of the eastern schools, Penn State was by far the school, and they were the only team from the east that was having national success, again, going down and beating Texas, beating good Kansas teams, Orange Bowl, Cotton Bowl right on through.

That and I think Coach Paterno to me has not only been great for college football but great for college sports. He's right up there with the John Woodens of collegiate sports history. To me everything about him was good. That's probably why everybody in Pennsylvania wanted to go there. They did things right in all regards.

Q. You married into sort of a Penn State family.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I was definitely the black sheep of our family at that point, definitely. They tolerated me for a year, the year I was at Pitt, because at that time that was a bitter rivalry, really bitter.

Q. A lot has been made of Ricky's kind of struggles in the first half and then he turns it around in the second half. Talk about how big getting through this week has to be going against Penn State and in that environment.

COACH FERENTZ: I look at it two ways. I think he's improved each week, kind of like our team, and that's a positive. I think maybe, too -- I think you have to take into consideration, most of our flux has been on the offensive side of the football, and to say the football is not affected, I think that would be an understatement. He's had to go through -- we haven't been stable up front, we haven't been stable outside. I think we all know the running back situation.

So it's been an interesting evolution for our offensive team. And for him just to pretend business as usual is a little bit of an understatement, and as I said on the teleconference, I was almost tempted Saturday to hold up a sign on that one throw that was like 20 yards from anybody, just hold up a sign, "it wasn't his fault," because I'm sure we had 70,000 and probably a few people in the press box thinking, oh, Stanzi, what's he doing out there. But believe it or not, it was a mis-run route by a good player. It was just an honest mistake.

That's the first thought I had there was okay, everybody is going to jump on Rick's back

for this one. It wasn't his fault. I think he's doing just fine and he'll be ready to go.

Q. Talk about the new young faces at running back and all the changes. How important is it to get out to a decent start in Happy Valley?

COACH FERENTZ: It would be important just like our last road trip, just in the fact that you don't want to -- things are going to be stoked up pretty good in there anyway, and we don't need to add to it. But if it happens, we're going to have to play through it, and it could happen. We're going to have to be mentally ready for that, too, if it gets a little sticky in there. That's the way it goes.

But it's a 60-minute game. We've got to play the whole 60 minutes. We're going to have to endure some up and downs this week, I promise you that. This is a good football team.

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