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An Interview With:

COACH O'KEEFE

COACH O'KEEFE: We work hard and every day is a learning experience. We try to put, especially the guys without experience, in situations they have not been in in the past and try to create as much game day atmosphere as we possibly can. Spent a little bit more time doing that this spring than we have probably in a while.

Q. How is James Vandenberg?

COACH O'KEEFE: He's good. He's doing well. Obviously he knows what he's doing in the system. He's doing a great job of leading the unit. The players really react and respond well to him. He is extremely accurate thrower. In practice, obviously, is all we have right now.

We have hit each other twice in scrimmage situations. And you know, James is one of those guys who doesn't usually see rushes and he's good at sitting in the pocket and making sure that he finishes what he starts. But he's not afraid to use his feet, either.

James is doing well. He works hard, studies hard, and he never leaves the field without correcting a mistake that he may have made in practice. If he didn't throw a ball the way he wanted to throw it, with a certain receiver running a certain route, he'll keep that receiver out until he corrects that; so he can leave the field knowing that he's capable of throwing it the right way, doing it the right way and making sure that he has the right mind-set the next time he let's the ball leave his hands.

Q. Norm made the observation just a little while ago about how James has kind of

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mirrored Ricky in terms of gaining credibility with everyone in the locker room. Is that the sense you've gotten as well in terms of the leadership he's been able to provide?

COACH O'KEEFE: I think so. The No. 1 way for a leader to get respect is to provide a great example for everybody else around them, and I think James does that in every aspect of his life. And when you're able to do that, people gravitate to you. They are going to be more willing to listen to what you have to say.

He's an extremely positive guy; so he communicates well in that regard and he really cares about helping his teammate. An example being, again, not only will he correct a mistake of his after practice, but he may take a receiver, a young receiver, especially -- or running back and keep him off practice until they get something straight on whatever route it is they want to straighten out. And that's happened with a lot of guys from Marcus Coker to Martin-Manley. He'll grab the young guys and work on things with them, and they grab him to do the work as well.

We do it with everybody and we ask everybody to do the same kind of things, but James is very good at doing that.

Q. Depth chart they handed us had a Wienke as the backup, is that how you see it?

COACH O'KEEFE: Right now, I would say, things haven't changed a whole lot at this particular point in time. John and A.J. are getting the exact same number of reps on a daily basis.

We have three practices left where maybe there will be a little bit more separation created but up until this point there really has not been a whole lot of separation. John knows a little bit more about what he's doing. He's been in the pocket in blitz situations a little bit more, blitz pickups, and he's gained a little bit more of an advantage in that regard. A.J., he's still working some of those things.

Coach O'Keefe 4.13.11

Q. Do you have to adjust your approach from quarterback to quarterback over the years? Do you do anything different with Vandenberg than you would have with Stanzi?

COACH O'KEEFE: In what regard?

Q. I guess maybe from a personality standpoint. I realize it's a vague question, but -- I think I just asked it as well as I can.

COACH O'KEEFE: Okay. Well, if you're asking from a play-calling standpoint -- that's why I'm trying to get you to be a little bit more specific. The system has some flexibility to use the different talents that guys have, obviously within it, and that's why we have been able to perform -- win 11 games with Brad Banks, come back the next year and win 11 games with Nathan Chandler, two totally different body types and athletes.

So I think, certainly, we have that flexibility within our system, and what you're always trying to do with quarterbacks is figure out what they do best and make sure you're calling those kinds of plays that allows them to be successful.

So there are going to be some years where a guy throws that 15-yard comeback; great and you are throwing it all the time. Other years, the next guy up might not throw that as well, but he throws a 12-yard-in better, or whatever it may be, a corner ball, better. So you're trying to get him in situations where he can throw his best throws, and have a chance to do what he does best.

And included with that would be what he sees best on the field, as well. Every guy is a little bit different how they see things and not everybody sees it the same way, so you don't always give them the same plays. If they are struggling with certain reads, you spend so much time trying to straighten those things out and progressively teach it to them and maybe go back and try to teach it again to them, especially if you feel that pattern could be important to what you're doing offensively, but if for whatever reason, they are not feeling it, seeing it, or, you know, being able to execute it, then you need to take that out of there and go on to whatever else is might be.

Personality-wise, I don't know if that's something -- you manage it a little bit. Some guys you can coach harder than other guys, but most of our guys are pretty thick-skinned that we have had here, and that's never been an issue. The key thing is, you play that position, you can't let them see you sweat. You've got to be poised, composed at all times no matter what's going on,

and you've got to be able to coach some of the guys that might get a little rattled, especially the younger freshmen, sophomores that haven't played and make sure you get them through some of those tough times, too.

I think James is kind of getting to that point, where let's just say, one of the other skill guys, whether it be a running back or tight end or wide receiver were to make a mistake, more than once during the course of practice, with the same play, or in the same type of situation; well, then, now the quarterback should be looking to say, hey, Mike, remember, you're going to run this route this way or just say to him -- there might be a code word we give them, or a trigger word that we would tell the quarterback or the quarterback could tell that receiver or that running back, you know, as we break the huddle, that would lock him into doing it the way we wanted to do it.

But he has to know that, hey, this guy already made the mistake twice in this particular route. We need to make sure that he takes the right split, could be a split, could have been he was shallow, whatever it may be. We will try to give him a trigger to remind the receiver or back or whatever it may be; James is at the start to where he can now start to do those kinds of things, as well, as opposed to just being up there trying to figure everything out for himself. Because ultimately for a quarterback to be successful, he's got to help the other guys around him. I don't know if that's -- if any of that answers any of that question that you started with.

Q. Ricky Stanzi was good. But can James be better by the time he's done?

COACH O'KEEFE: If he plays better than Rick did, then he'll be better. You know, that's the one way we are going to be able to measure it. Sitting here, I can't tell you at this particular point in time. He's got to prove it on the field.

Q. Did James have a quarterback in his life -- I think his dad played quarterback in college or something, and he played in high school in a high-caliber pass offense, did he come more ready-made mechanically in the way he thought and the way he sees the game?

COACH O'KEEFE: His dad played high school quarterback and college football and his grandfather coached high school football; so he may have been a quarterback, as well.

When James came, which I never saw him do obviously in camps or in seven-on-sevens or anything like that at camp.

He can operate under the center better than most guys that came out of a spread offense like he came out of could. For instance, when Drew Tate first came, he had told me that he had not done a lot of this stuff since he was in, I don't know, seventh grade or something along those lines.

But James always trained under center when they were doing extra drills or something like that, and he would work with his dad and his grandfather. So he's fortunate in that regard to have had that and he has not had to transition. Because that was probably Stanzi's toughest transition initially footwork-wise, not being in the gun every play, basically.

Q. So you didn't have to break him down and build him back up, or did you?

COACH O'KEEFE: You never break anybody down and build them back up totally at this level, because you don't have that kind of time in a lot of respects. But James was, I guess it would suffice to say, James was very good mechanically in all aspects of his game, his feet and with his throwing mechanics, as well.

Q. Kevonte Martin-Manley's name has been thrown a lot as a guy who can step up for that receiving core. We don't know about him. What makes you believe that he can step in right away and make plays?

COACH O'KEEFE: Well, right now he's the guy that's getting a lot of reps. But he's got a long way to go. He's a work-in-progress. He's No. 1, he has to nail the system down. He doesn't have that down right now and he has to work to get that down first so that he can operate at full speed, because receivers have to operate at full speed. If you don't know the system, you don't know the protections and the hots and the sights and things like that; you'll be going half speed all the time or running the wrong routes.

So No. 1, he's got to get the system down before we can even talk about any of the other stuff that you were talking about. But he is tough, and he has great desire to excel and he does have skill. He does have skill.

Q. What about C.J. Fiedorwicz, what kind of progress has he made?

COACH O'KEEFE: He's making good progress. Eric Johnson has done a great job with all of those guys. Especially with C.J. and C.J.'s growth, you know, just to go back to Kevonte, his growth was totally dependent on him learning the system and knowing the system well.

Now that he does, he can operate a lot differently. And with a lot more speed and a lot more confidence, which means you could be a lot more aggressive. And that's the thing that's helping him the most right now.

Q. How difficult is it for a player who has been dismissed from the program to work his way back on to the team?

COACH O'KEEFE: That's a great question. I would say, very difficult, but I don't even know if we have had one, have we? You guys know better than I. My memory lasts 40 seconds nowadays.

But anyway, I think it would be a very difficult thing to do, but, you know, that has nothing to do with me. That has everything to do with what's going on between that player and the head coach and the team.

Q. As offensive coordinator, do you look at the offensive line, you have both tackles back, center back, guys who have played at guard; does this excite you? Is this something that you can start here and it will probably be strong and something you can build on?

COACH O'KEEFE: It's always a place you want to start. We have been in some of those situations, even last year to a certain degree, you have a three-year starter with an inexperienced offensive line. That is always a concern that I would have.

So this is certainly a much better situation from an experience standpoint, and from my seat. And especially starting a first-time starter at quarterback, even though he has a couple of starts under there now it's going to be a whole different deal being the guy all the time, not having to worry about any of the other stuff. That's always a plus, huge plus and hopefully develop some depth there. Reese does a great job. It's part of who we are. We want to be able to run the ball, and then kind of go from there.

Q. Keenan Davis -- it's his time He sat behind Marvin McNutt the last two years being

the third-ish guy. Is he prepared for this, the spotlight-type deal?

COACH O'KEEFE: He looks to me like he has. I would say, he is one of the older guys that's made a dramatic jump in how he's going about things right now. He's developed into a leader at his position that the young guys look up to and are following. They will watch how he does stuff.

He's setting the bar right now, which is important for us to have set, because Marvin's missed all of spring, basically, and Keenan has had to carry that leadership role. Although Marvin has been out of practice every day helping the young guys, as well, but those guys are going to be very important to us next year obviously.

Q. Did you hold your breath a little bit when Marvin was thinking NFL?

COACH O'KEEFE: You know, it's just like everything else. Not that I'm an a total Novocaine drip or anything, but whether it's guys getting hurt or guys going to the NFL, you just keep on doing. I don't spend much time over thinking things to be perfectly honest with you.

Q. What have you seen from Brandon Scherff, a guard that's impressed you?

COACH O'KEEFE: I've seen a big guy who can move his feet whose got to learn what he's doing. And that's the thing.

Other than the quarterback position, the toughest place to learn, where you have to learn the most about what we are doing, is going to be up front. And when you're in there at the guard position, it's a little different. When you're at tackle, you're dealing usually with just a guy out here over you, or a little wider than you normally, and you know what's happened and you know where you're headed.

But inside there, those guards, they have got to deal with, you know, 300-pound guys, fast linebackers, a lot of movement, things like that, a lot of things that tackles don't have to deal with.

Their world is a little bit different and it takes a little bit longer to get used to it. And again, it comes back to if you know what you're doing, you can be very aggressive at what you do. And when Brandon knows exactly what he's doing, he'll be much better able to execute.

But he's still a guy trying to get the system figured out, and Reese is doing a great job with him. You can see him flash and you can see him use that body at times, which makes a huge

difference. But he's got to know what he's doing on every play.

Q. When you're plugging some newer guys into key spots on both offense and defense does it make the spring finale a little more important than in the past just for getting more reps and a better evaluation of them as you head into the summer?

COACH O'KEEFE: When you say "finale," are you talking about -- you mean the last three practices, the last week, or are you talking about the spring game? What do you mean exactly?

Q. The game.

COACH O'KEEFE: No. To me, the game is another practice as far as we are concerned. If we can work it into a game format that kind of makes it interesting for the fans, we would love to be able to do that.

But for us, we've got to still work on blitz pick up. We have still got to work on red zone. We have got to work on all of the situational things that we want to work on, and then you know, we'll fit part of it into what we want to do with the spring game.

But there isn't a practice that is more important -- there is the not one practice that's more important than another. These guys are constantly being evaluated. Every rep on tape, everything is watched. They watch everything. We watch everything. And the evaluation is ongoing.

So the thing that's critical is getting those guys in the positions that we need them in so that they can experience what could happen. And try to simulate the same kind of pressure that they might be under in a ballgame. And that takes some work. But that would be the value of Saturday; we get 25,000, 30,000 people, however many people would be out there.

And now instead of them just looking up in the crowd like they used to, the guys that used to just look up there, now they have to actually listen to what's going on in the huddle and listen to the snap count and all of the other stuff and kind of go from there.

That's where the value would come in.

Q. You film every practice, every rep; that's a lot of film. How does that break down? Do you guys watch it and the players? Are

there assignments how does that work?

COACH O'KEEFE: If we pushed it out to you guys, you guys would watch it.

Q. Is there a protocol for that? How do you guys do it?

COACH O'KEEFE: We just come in and watch it. The offense come in, we have a meeting time, we watch all the tape. It's impossible for us to get through it with our players, coaches and players, all the time.

So the guys are expected to get in and get it finished a lot of times on their own if they can. A lot of times it works out that way. And the more they do, the better off they will be in the long run, as well. That's where guys like Stanzi really made up ground. They would out-work people by going in there when they had extra time and wanted to do it, and just watch a certain segment of something they wanted to get better at. They might have just watched Stanzi one time spend a week just watching safeties.

You know, other times, might have studied a certain coverage for a week or two. He's studied opponents, whatever it was, in a big 'ole notebook that he kept so that he always took good notes and always knew what was going on. But that's how he learned and got good at what he was doing.

But it's no different than a concert pianist or great actor. You don't get good by accident. You get good by practicing. And there's never enough time to really get great at what you want to do, just in a two-hour practice, or in a two-hour rehearsal, two-hour recital, whatever it may be. Just you've got to do more. It kind of like, what was it, Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule or whatever it may be. There's a lot of sense to that. There's no natural talents. It's just who put their 10,000 hours in; did you do it like Tiger Woods, start when you were four, finished when you were 14? Or did you do it like -- who know's who, but somebody that took him -- later in life. And really that's what it's all about and our guys seem to understand that and that's kind of what's helped us the past 12 years.

Q. You have a cornerback this fall taking Organic Chemistry II. Do you have input on what guys take, when and where? Do you suggest to gear down this semester? I don't know how that works.

COACH O'KEEFE: He has goals academically. And our job is obviously -- the No. 1 job here is to make sure these guys get a degree. We have always been, and Kirk is absolutely great

about this, very flexible with how we go about things.

So James, obviously he knows what he's doing. He knows our schedule. He knows his schedule and kind of work from there. That stuff is tough stuff. It's a lot different than other guys would be taking. But it's what he wants, and he's doing well from every indication I have.

Q. Stanzi said that James -- he was talking a couple weeks ago, he said that James is in the film room at this point more than Ricky was. So is he catching up?

COACH O'KEEFE: Stanzi said that?

Q. Is he catching up for what he's been missing, or is that just him? Do you see him doing that throughout his career?

COACH O'KEEFE: I think they all do it, but I think you do it a little bit differently when you know, hey, there usually is a different mind-set with who is the starter, who is the backup, wherever you are on the depth chart.

But James has never done that actually. He's kind of always known. We always set goals each year. I always ask what their goals are, and they always write, they want to be the starter, obviously.

And James came in with like some statistical-based information, because I would always tell the guys who were backups, they had better be -- they can't think like backups. They can't prepare like backups. They have to think and prepare like starters.

James one-upped me and came in with some statistical information on why he needed to be ready to be the starter because of what happens -- I forget if it was NFL, Big Ten or college. He made me sit up; oohh, that's really going on. But there's a lot of backups that end up playing. And he really proved it right himself. But you know, he's going to work at it.

Q. Jason White has been moved back to offense?

COACH O'KEEFE: Smart guy, sharp guy. Total team guy, too, you know what I mean. Really helping a lot of other guys along the way. Done a super job in that regard. And again, you know, the challenge he has right now is pretty much making sure he's got the system down.

We moved him enough, he would probably

be a great coach by the time we were done with him; if that's what he wanted to do. But right now we have moved him so much, we've probably put him in a state of confusion at times, but he's doing really well, he really is.

Q. Is it a good thing we have not asked you about running back, except for Jason?

COACH O'KEEFE: Hey, it's all what it is. Marcus is doing well. Really working extremely hard. De'Andre has got a little groin or hamstring right now that's held him out last week but we are hopeful we are going to get him back this week. We have liked what we have seen. A long way to go, in a lot of areas, but night and day from where he was during preseason. So it's good.

Q. Your first comments when you came in here were about Norm. You've worked with him for a long time. How important is he to the success of this program? What does he do for this program? And how much did it mean just to have him back in December?

COACH O'KEEFE: Well, that's why I said tough. He's the model, the example of the toughness that we want to have in every aspect of our program. And Norm, he provides a lot of tremendous wisdom, as you guys experienced -- as you've experienced from time to time.

And he provides that same wisdom to us as a program, whether it's in meetings or, you know, out on the field or with our players, whatever it may be. He's a guy who has been around for a long time, worked for a lot of different people. Has great perspective on what's going on in life, period, in that there are things bigger than just, you know, just this; which is hard to believe, isn't it.

But you know, he's able to bring some reality and levity and realism to what we are trying to do with these players most of the time. He's a great leader.

Q. A lot of people wouldn't be back in his spot working. Why do you think he is, and just what does it mean just from a football sense for you guys?

COACH O'KEEFE: I'm sure you guys asked him these questions. But he loves football. He loves being around these players. That's why he's here. That's why he loves doing what he's doing.

These are small -- for him, for other people, these are giant obstacles to overcome. For him, these are small bumps in the road. That's

it. It's crazy in that regard. It was kind of cold out in practice -- last week, a cold day, I don't know if he told you this story or not. But they are driving around in the cart and it was so cold -- I don't know how the conversation actually came up.

But we were talking about, "it was pretty nippy out there," or whatever.

And he said, "Yeah, it was so darned cold my leg fell off."

And I'm like, what? And I can't remember if he said leg or foot or whatever. But I don't know how it's put on or anything, but whatever it was, I don't know if it was a contraction or whatever. But he didn't even blink. He thought it was funny.

So, yeah, a few people here think it was funny, but probably his wife doesn't think that's funny. But what else is new with any of us -- excuse me, in that regard. But he's just a tough guy. Okay, have I gone too far now, or what? (Laughter).

But he's a tough guy, and you know, a great guy. A great guy to be around and a great coach. He sees stuff. He knows football. And he understands, he understands the players. And there's no generational gap that has been, you know, become this grand canyon between him and some 18-year-old that's coming in as a freshman. It's pretty amazing, which is good.

Q. You said he knows football and we all know that and you just reiterated. Before he left he had said your offense has a chance to be very good. Can you respond to that?

COACH O'KEEFE: I would respond, I would imagine, just like every offense we have, has a chance to be good if we execute the way we are capable of executing. We have a long way to go. And like I said, I don't -- you know, I don't even know if you -- and Norm has been at practice every day.

So it starts up front like you're saying, but there's a lot of parts that have to come together that still, from a depth and skill standpoint, that would need to get us to the point where we would have a chance to be a good offense.

But you are always -- people ask that question all the time. You know, are you happy with where the offense is? Well, I'm a coach. I'm not going to be happy with that until we are done and we have seen the finished product. In my opinion, you are not successful unless that unit/team/player is doing everything that they

potentially are capable of doing, and that's really what we are trying to do. So we have a long way to go.

Norm might not be looking at it quite the same way as I do, but you know, there's been some times where we have flashed but there have been a lot of times where we need to get better. And again, the young guys that are playing, the Brandon Scherffs, the Kevonte Martins, the De'Andre Johnsons, Fiedorowicz, the names that come up, these are not seasoned veterans. These are guys that are still learning what to do.

Marcus Coker has three starts under his belt or whatever it is; James Vandenberg has had two starts. I mean, we are far from being complete in any regard. And that's why you guys always wonder why we are like how we are. But the one thing you have to remember when you ask these questions is, we are at practice -- I am at practice every day. And I'm not seeing us -- we are not scoring touchdowns, you know, every play or every drive. We are making mistakes, and I'm looking at all of the things we have got to get better at.

I'm not usually focused on the things we are, you know, good at at this stage. But that's really the crux of the whole thing, the difference is --

Q. You were asked about offense -- I know your focus is on offense and that's to where you're at, but has anybody on defense out of your peripheral caught your eye?

COACH O'KEEFE: The secondary is playing well, very well, fast, running the ball, covering a lot of ground. You know, linebackers, they all run and love to hit. You know, guys up front are growing up, like you have to when you have not played quite as much as everybody else. And same thing with anywhere, all of the linebackers are young, too, for the most part. But yeah, a lot of fresh, new faces out there.

So you know, you might have a player or a series that goes your way pretty well, but there's been a lot of back and forth and there's a lot of growing up to do from what I can tell.

Q. Anybody really stand out or surprise you about this spring as you've gone along?

COACH O'KEEFE: Not one thing that I can think of. As far as if you're looking for something that stood out above everything else, it's been a fairly normal spring. A lot of teaching, a lot of learning, a lot of effort, and you know, most of

it isn't a whole lot of fun. Those are all the common denominators I see every spring.

Q. One guy you haven't mentioned, Jonathan Gimm, and I know he's No. 1 because of Roger's health issues, but is he taking to the transition from tight end?

COACH O'KEEFE: You know, he has. He has done pretty well. He's worked that position before. We've had him back and forth a couple of times. He's another guy that we haven't quite found a home for, and now we have. And the reps that he's gotten just because he's playing fullback have really improved his overall performance, especially in the blocking aspect of his job, and he's doing pretty well, actually in the pass game, too. That's been good. Because the speed of that blitz pick up that comes now is a little different.

Q. How is Dan Heiar doing? Have you gotten an update on his position?

COACH O'KEEFE: Same stuff that Kirk's mentioned, and that's a great question for Kirk. He'll handle all of the medical stuff when he's with you guys I guess on Saturday. Dan was doing a nice job while we had him. Hope we get him back soon.

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