

September 28, 2010



An interview with:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome. First of all, just our condolences to the Evashevski family. Great to have all the kids back earlier this month. Again, our condolences, tough to lose a parent certainly.

Moving forward here on the injury front. Jewel had surgery last week. Bruce Davis is having surgery today. We're all hopeful that goes well and Bruce can get back and start rehabbing here quickly.

Captain-wise, we have the same four guys we've had the last couple weeks. We settled in here it seems with Adrian Clayborn, Karl Klug defensively, Ricky Stanzi, Julian Vandervelde. Those four guys will lead us this week.

Briefly about last week. Congratulations to Mike Daniels on his award. Positive step for our team certainly. Now we move on to Big Ten play. It's an exciting time for everybody.

Just a couple words about Penn State. They've got a good football team. Pull out the same script from any year we've played them. Got a bunch of excellent players, well-coached. It's the most stable program in the country. I think all you have to do if you want to talk about Penn State is look at the last five years, 51 wins in that time period, couple BCS Bowls, Big Ten championship.

Then also the other points prominent, no different than when I was a younger person growing up in western Pennsylvania, they've always played good defense. Last two years they've allowed about 12 points a game on average. Seems like they've always had a great running back. Royster is back now for his about eighth year, is getting ready to break every record

they've had, and they've had some tremendous running backs through the years.

It seems like a vintage Penn State football team. Excellent group of players. Well-coached. Great challenge for our team.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. When Adam Robinson goes out, would you put in Paul first, then Marcus Coker?

COACH FERENTZ: Trying to get caught up. Paul who?

Q. Brad Rogers.

COACH FERENTZ: Got you. Throwing me off on that one. We're going to keep Penn State guessing. They'll have to figure it out Saturday. It will be one of the two. That part is not much of a guess.

Q. Looking at the numbers, Ricky Stanzi is something like fifth in the country in passing efficiency. Have you seen him in his final year take that sort of leap that you would look for in a fifth-year senior?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think he's enjoying the luxury of being an experienced player. He's always been very committed, worked extremely hard. He's off to a real good start. I didn't realize he was that high statistically. He's been playing well, doing a lot of good things out there, leading the team very well.

He's off to a good start. It's kind of like our whole team right now, the next eight weeks will really define us. He's off to a good start. I think that's one of the benefits of being an experienced player, a fifth-year senior. If he can take advantage of that, that's a good thing.

Q. Talk about having six teams in the Big Ten ranked.

COACH FERENTZ: I didn't know that, first of all. I'll give you a quick commentary on

rankings. We were ranked what going into Arizona? You guys know that better than I do. Top 10, right? We were underdogs to a team ranked 18th.

I'm a little mathematically challenged anyway, but I think that's a pretty good snapshot of what rankings in September mean in my mind. We'll know in a month or so what is what, who's who. Wish I was that smart right now. I'm not.

Q. Same thing about statistics at this time of year?

COACH FERENTZ: They don't count. Punt blocks, kickoff returns, those kinds of things, if you're giving up a lot of those, that's a bad sign. We've done one of each. Clearly we need to invest more time and more attention to those areas. If we don't get those shored up, we'll be in serious trouble.

There's a lot of ebb and flow in the first month, month and a half of the season. Once we get into mid-October, it's easier to predict what is going to happen. That's not accounting for those things you don't expect to happen that do happen. That could happen to anybody. If you lose the wrong player, things could change fast.

Q. How about Danny Murray, is he any closer to getting back?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes. I think he is. He kicked on Sunday. Close to full speed. Kind of a confidence thing with him right now, which I think is typical with any injury. Sometimes you have to push yourself through that last percentage point. I think he's getting close.

Q. Did he have a hip injury?

COACH FERENTZ: No, he's got a muscle strain, which is not a good thing for a kicker, certainly.

Q. If he gets back, is he the guy?

COACH FERENTZ: We haven't seen him in a month so it's hard to say that. Literally, I mean, we've seen him obviously. He's not missing. Seeing him out there on the field executing, that type of thing.

At this point for us to project someone who hasn't been with us in a month to play this week is unrealistic. Down the road, we'll see what happens. If he comes out today, starts banging them from 50, that's a different story. Got to get him over that hump first.

Q. Different from the last two years. You went in as the underdog and won. Now Penn State would be considered the underdog. Is that dynamic effective at all?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not sure why they'd be considered the underdog. Again, I'm looking at a team that's won 51 games, five years, they don't give up points. I mean, I think our biggest margin of victory in this series is 12 points back in '03.

We've had tough games with them or we've gotten nailed pretty good. I'm expecting this thing to be a real 60-minute game and hopefully we'll be in there in the fourth quarter.

Q. As good as their program has been over the last few years, you have had some success. Does that give the players some confidence?

COACH FERENTZ: We're not going in thinking that we don't have a chance to compete at all. But bottom line is, again, historically against this team, if you're going to have a chance to be there in the fourth quarter, you better play your best football. We've done that. In the games we've done that, we've won. When we didn't do that, the game was over pretty early in '07. If you open the door at all for them, it makes it tough to win.

The common denominator is you have to play your best football. We've been fortunate, done that in some instances. We've hung in there, played well in the fourth quarter. Second half; have to do something typically to spark things. Last year it took a great special teams effort - actually a couple of them - to really get the thing going a little bit the other way. Wasn't like we scored a lot of points offensively against them, that's for sure.

Q. You mentioned Evan Royster. What makes him stand out?

COACH FERENTZ: He's a smooth and efficient player I guess is how I'd describe him. I think he does everything very well. Not that he's a flashy player, but he's very productive. You look at the bottom line, his statistics are normally very good. That's how he's gotten to where he's gotten career-wise. He just kind of does it with ease. That's what good players do.

The other part is if you leave the door open at all, might be 60 yards later you're looking at him.

Like any great running back, you have to be at your best every play, otherwise he can take on the distance on you. He's really a very good football player, does everything well: run, pass, all that stuff.

Q. From a coaching standpoint regarding conference play, is there a different dynamic getting ready?

COACH FERENTZ: I think there's anticipation and excitement for everybody. First four games, different challenge. That's one thing about being in a conference. That was new to me when I got here. I played in a conference when I was in college. But when I was at Pitt in 1980, we were not a member of a conference. It was a different feel. We played a random schedule geographically. Things didn't all connect that way.

Coming out here, it was a very different feel back in '81. I think that's one of the neat things about being in a conference. Certainly the Big Ten has great traditions, great stadiums, great competition, excellent coaches and players. It's fun.

When you're in a conference, you kind of know each other's moves and personalities a little bit. It's a little different feel. That's for sure.

Q. How important is this game in terms of momentum for the next seven games?

COACH FERENTZ: I look at them all independently. They're each and every one of them going to be very, very important. From what I can tell right now, I anticipate them all being really tough.

It's a long race. It's an eight-week race, a long race. Not the end of the world if you don't get the first one, but it makes it that much tougher. It makes it that much tougher. I'm just speaking from a historical standpoint. I think the conference appears like it's going to be strong. I think everybody felt that coming in. Very balanced.

Historically, if you're hanging around waiting for Ohio State to lose three, four games, maybe even two, I think historically, that could be proven as a bad strategy. If you're talking about playing at the top of the league, you better be at your best every week.

Q. Last few years you got to start conference play on the road. You have been vocal about that.

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't been that vocal. I've agreed with you when you pointed identity out, all of you, not just you.

Q. Comment about starting at home this year.

COACH FERENTZ: The nice thing about being on the road is if you can win the first one, you've got four at home, three on the road. You can spin it however.

The bad thing about playing at home is, after this one, we've got four on the road and three on the home. Bottom line is you're going to play four and four. It's curious how it's worked out, at least since '99. Probably the next 12 years it's going to go the other way. That would be my guess.

Q. You used a lot of different combinations on the kick coverage unit. Was it a matter of once you got comfortably ahead the other day you wanted to see who was out there?

COACH FERENTZ: Really more we had some guys that had some injury issues, and had to come out of the game. Really probably more that than anything. We're hopeful to have everybody ready this week. We have a couple guys that are going to be touch-and-go through the week. But hopefully we'll have everybody ready, see what happens.

I'll say what I said a couple weeks ago. I think we're capable; we're just not consistent. I think we got guys that can do it. We've done it very well at times, then there have been other times where we didn't look like we had any idea what we were doing.

We don't have a lot of flexibility right now. I think it's kind of a matter of us, we have to be more consistent and do a really good job each and every time we're out there on the field.

Q. You pulled Anthony Hitchens, redshirt. He played on that unit. Are you right now kind of 'all hands on deck'?

COACH FERENTZ: We are. We're definitely at that point. Part of that, we moved him over to the running back just because for obvious reasons. We're running out of guys there. So we moved him. He played high school running back. We moved him over there. We thought when we recruited him, he had a chance to be a good

special teams guy. Maybe he could fortify some groups and give us a little bit more depth. He is one of the guys that got out there in the game. That was good to see. We may try to build off of that.

Q. What are some of your principles on kick coverage? Certain people run as hard as they can.

COACH FERENTZ: It's like every position, or every play offensively, defensively, everybody has an assignment, they have a role they have to play. If they can execute that role successfully, they have keys, all those kinds of things. So there is a method to it.

But it's not quite as extensive as maybe a pass pattern that has a couple different options based on coverages and that type of thing. Typically younger guys can get involved a little quicker.

Above everything else, it's attitude, really having a good attitude. It's not always speed. I go back to my time in the NFL. Benny Thompson, one of the best special teams guys I've ever seen. He might have been a 4.8 safety. He covered kickoffs at 4.5 speed. That's because we wanted to get down there and do something. He made a living doing that basically.

It's not always your non-football speed, the speed when they take guys out on track sometimes, I remember combines, whatever, it's more how badly you want to get down the field. Dallas Clark used to cover like crazy. Greenway covered like crazy. Both those guys can run pretty good, too. But they ran faster covering kickoffs than they might have been doing some other stuff.

Q. How is Norm doing?

COACH FERENTZ: Taking it a day at a time, but things are progressing. A couple different options we're looking at right now. I think we're gaining ground. That's the good news. Our number one option is getting him back to normalcy. He's been hospitalized a couple weeks. Getting his strength back is paramount. It's not going to be this week. We'll take it a week at a time, see where we're at.

Q. He's still in the hospital?

COACH FERENTZ: He is as of today. They're just trying to map out the next move. But I think we're getting close to making a move.

Q. Taking out maybe the last drive at Arizona, do you commend your defensive staff for what they've done without Norm, how they've pieced it together?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes. We've played pretty good defense I think through the time here. It's a little bit like our game at Penn State last year. Eight of those points came off of special teams, a sack that was in the end zone, which was set up by special teams. Their defense held us to 12.

I think if you look at our defense, they're playing pretty good football right now. As I said, we're better with Norm, no question about it. If he's not here, if I get hit by a bus this afternoon, somebody's going to have to jump in there and take my role for a little while. It's just how it goes. Everybody rallies together, does what they have to do.

I think the defensive guys have done a great job, players and coaches. It's kind of what you expect. I think we have good people here that pull together when things happen. That's what we're looking for.

Q. (Question regarding continuity.)

COACH FERENTZ: I think it helps. If something happens, which can happen, it doesn't hurt. Nobody has ever worried about who is getting credit over here. I think everybody is worried about getting the job done. That's been the attitude. I think the players are the same way.

Again, we'll be better when Norm Parker gets back. It will be good for Norm, too. I think he's getting itchy. But in the meantime you just do what you got to do. We'll all get through this.

Q. (Indiscernible.)

COACH FERENTZ: I've been on staffs, not here, in 21 years, which is one of the reasons I've enjoyed it so much here. I've been on staffs where there's jockeying for position. Guys are clearly worried about getting credit. They kind of disappear when things go bad sometimes, those same guys.

In my 20 some years here, nobody ever has been like that. We have a staff here that works together, worries about the common goal. That really helps. It makes life a lot more enjoyable, too. It's a lot more fun working with people like that.

Q. What has Bolden looked like to you

as a true freshman?

COACH FERENTZ: It's impressive that a true freshman would start there. I think it's the first time that's happened. I'm sure I read that. You can see why when he gets there. He's a good football player. That's why they recruited him. We knew about him. We couldn't get a phone call back.

Excellent athlete, good quarterback. Probably the most impressive thing to us he doesn't look to be in awe of anything out there. For a true freshman to be like that, that's awfully impressive, especially if you go down to a place like Tuscaloosa.

I don't think he's going to be all nervous and all that stuff Saturday. I think he'll come in here ready to go.

Q. Will Paki O'Meara be able to play?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he's got a shot. Might be on a limited basis, but he's got a shot there, yeah. He probably won't be on the kickoff team. Tip you off on that one. Might be the Jayme Murphy program here. He has had two concussions now within a month and a half time. We're going to be very careful about what he does. That might be a career thing, too, keeping him off the kickoff team.

Q. How about Kirksey?

COACH FERENTZ: He has a shot. Hopefully he'll be there. We're expecting him to be fine. We'll know more today. But so far, so good.

Q. What is the optimal number of carries for Adam Robinson?

COACH FERENTZ: This week, 45, 50. That means we win (laughter). I'd buy that. He's got all week to rest.

We're going to do what it takes. Again, I probably should know this. I don't know how many Fred Russell averaged. Kind of that scenario I guess, right? But I think it's legitimately, I don't know why a guy can't carry in his 20s, I don't know why he can't, if they're healthy, so...

Q. Did you see anything out of Brad Rogers and Marcus Coker that scared you into more carries for Adam Robinson or did you like what you saw?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I think it was good to see them in live action. We really haven't seen those guys perform in that kind of situation. So it was a good start. They're hardly ready to go.

But just cut them loose and say, okay, they're ready. But it was a positive step. Like I said, first time he has been tackled intentionally on this campus in our football facility. That's a start.

We think they both have good futures. But they're young guys right now. That's a little concerning right now. It would be that way at any position. I'll preface it there, too. Last year Riley Reiff stepped up and did a good job at redshirt freshman. Nolan MacMillan did that this year. It's conceivable both guys can do fine.

Marcus Coker has missed practice time. We're playing catch-up. We would love them to go through camp unscathed, we'd have a much better fundamental base right now.

Q. They're bigger backs.

COACH FERENTZ: That's an issue with younger guys, they think they can make 12 cuts. You can't do that. Things happen way too fast. This week, things are going to close down even quicker. Better make up your mind and get going or we're going to be getting nailed in the backfield. Better be pretty quick with the decisions.

Q. Talk about how much growing up in Pennsylvania, your relationship with Coach Paterno, how has that changed, the kid watching him, and now...

COACH FERENTZ: I was a young guy in awe of him. I'm past 50 and still in awe of him. I had such great respect as a young person growing up in that part of the country. You had him and Chuck Noll, too, very local, very prominent coaches to watch. Then I played for a high school coach that was actual -- actually two high school coaches that were extraordinary. Very lucky that way.

You know, I mean, those 'Kodak moments'. I remember going to the first league meeting in May of '99 and being in a room with Paterno at a meeting, where I was actually like kind of on the same line - not the same line, but kind of. That was kind of neat.

The most impressive thing, again, is his passion for what he does, what he's done. He's very principled, as you know. This was 12 years ago, my first exposure to him in a professional setting. He hasn't changed. He loves college football, loves college athletics. He's good for sports.

Q. Certain programs have a stigma, they're mistake-prone, get them on the run, they're going to make mistakes. Penn State, they're first in the country in fewest penalty yards.

COACH FERENTZ: That's almost every year they're right there.

Q. How do you coach against that?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, you know, Coach Paterno is the leading all-time winning head football coach in college football. Didn't happen by accident. There are several people historically, there's some common dominators. One thing they don't do, they're never going to beat themselves. I say 'never'. It's one thing they don't do as a rule. First thing you have to do is make other people beat you. They've had that in check for a long time.

I alluded to they've always been very, very good defensively. When I was in high school, before that in the '70s and '60s, they were always good defensively. They typically can threaten you with the run, running backs that can hurt you with the run game. He had two guys get drafted in the first round. Probably never happened since, except for James and Dickerson (SMU). I forgot about those guys. Franco Harris was a fullback. I don't think his statistics were extraordinary. But you had him and Lydell Mitchell. Seems like they've had great backs ever since I can recall.

They take care of the basics. They have good players, are very well-coached. It's hard to slip something in on them.

Q. What do you see in Derrell's play this year?

COACH FERENTZ: He's worked hard when he's been out at practice. I've been out there most of the time. I think he had a week and a half injury or two week, somewhere there in camp, during that period. Probably about a week and a half. But when he's been on the field, he's been working hard. He's playing like he's a fifth-year senior, too. He's playing better, more efficiently. You know, it's all good.

Only complaint I got with him right now he's a fifth-year senior, he's planning on graduating in December. Not complaining about that. He has a class that requires him to leave right around the middle of practice every Wednesday. A little frustrating. But that's why it's college football. Got a couple guys that leave Wednesday around mid-practice.

Q. Doesn't seem like Johnson-Koulianos wants to talk to us this year. Did we do something to make him mad?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think you did. I think he loves you guys actually, talking in general terms. You can move in with him in January. Help yourself. I told him that, too. He can Twitter. Can have a ball (laughter).

Q. Johnson-Koulianos is coming up with some pretty big milestones. What does that mean to him, what does that mean to you? You've had several wide receivers up in the top receptions.

COACH FERENTZ: You know, bottom line is he's been able to play four years basically. That's a part of it. That's not something you just take for granted, the fact that he's been able to stay healthy. He has been productive. He's come up with a lot of big plays for us, a lot of deep balls where he's made some good plays.

When you connect on deep balls, that helps the yardage part of it. He's done a lot of good things for us, been a real good player.

He's really a pleasant guy. Like I told you before, it's not like we're cats and dogs at all. I'm the killjoy and he's the fun guy, so... Old guy/young guy. One of those deals.

Q. How big was the game two years ago for people getting confidence in Ricky Stanzi and what he could do in the closing moments of a ballgame?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it was big for a lot of reasons, individuals. Biggest thing was we had gone - this was well-documented - we had gone through a period where we were having a hard time in those tough, tight games. Obviously that season at one point we were 3-3, a five-point loss, I think it was 5-3-1, something like that. Three games by a handful of points. So the next step was for us to win a close game.

To win close games, you have to be there in the fourth quarter, do some things, make some plays, make some stops. We made a big stop there. Mitch King drew a holding penalty, then we came up with an interception, drove the ball. Not the same formula as when Larry Station made the stop and we drove it against Michigan (1985), but kind of the circumstance. Then went on a dramatic field goal.

I think that got us over the top that maybe we can win some close games again. The next week we had a close game I think with Purdue.

For us to be successful, kind of like the special teams deal, if we're not good on special teams, we're going to be a middle-of-the-road-team, and if we can't win close games, we're going to be a middle-of-the-road team. Those are kind of like fundamental building blocks for us.

Q. Talk about the decision to go with Mike Meyer at kicker. Was that due to something he was doing better in practice?

COACH FERENTZ: It's been pretty close all the way through. Even when Danny Murray was in the mix, it's been pretty close to call. There hasn't been a definitive guy with an edge, a guy with a definitive edge. You know, you just kind of go by feel a little bit. Give Meyer a shot and see what he does. He's been doing a good job on kickoffs. See if he can take the next step.

Q. What are your thoughts on spirit sections Saturday night by color?

COACH FERENTZ: Thanks for bringing that up.

Q. What do you think about that?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not smart enough to think about it. Somebody had a thought, I think it's outstanding. Our crowds have been great. Every time I get the opportunity, thanks for reminding me, our fans have been great. We appreciate them being at our games. You look around the country right now, it's not a gut synch to expect sellouts anywhere. People have a lot of choices to make. We really appreciate that.

This concept is really good. I assume it's going to be great. I'm anxious to see it. To be on a national telecast Saturday night, that's pretty good stuff. It's a great environment for the players, great environment for the fans. We're really eager to get in there and get going. We have a lot of work to do between now and then, though.

Thank you.

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