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An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Just a couple quick notes. Captains this week will be the same four that we've had the last several weeks, Mitch King and Matt Kroul on the defensive side, then Shonn Greene and Rob Bruggeman on offense. Those guys have done a great job and they'll lead the team this week.

Injury-wise, we're doing fairly well. Probably the two iffiest guys are Tony Moeaki and Seth Olsen. We'll see how the week goes. Tony is scheduled to practice today on a limited basis, so we'll take that day by day and see what goes on there. Seth is scheduled to go tomorrow. We'll see how that goes. I'm not quite as optimistic there, so we'll play that by ear.

The bye week was good, gave everybody a chance to rest a little bit. Some of the joints that were sore, that type of thing, had a chance to heal up, and I think we're doing okay there, and hopefully we had a good week. We'll know more here at the end of this week. But it went pretty well for the most part. We're anxious to turn our sights, get back into a game week routine, and certainly we'll have our hands full this week, playing a very talented, very explosive Illinois football team.

They're very talented on both sides of the ball and special teams and a very capable team. That's one front. And then the other front is making sure we're ready to go, and those are really the two things on our plate right now, and we'll go from there.

Q. What do you think the reason is that you guys were able to handle the Illini so well in the past five meetings?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know how well they've been. Most recent memory, not many of them have been easy, I know that, going back to 2004. That was a tough game, a real windy game, and hard-fought. Certainly last year it took everything we could muster to eke out a win.

I know going back there a couple years ago, Alex Kanellis having an appendicitis attack and that game being a real tough, hard game, too, and that was back when they were just getting started, but even then it was a tough ballgame. I think we're probably looking at more of the same this week. It will be a hard-fought game.

Q. The last two performances, it seems a lot of fans out there are actually kind of getting ahead of themselves, looking at how well you played against Florida and stuff. Are you similarly optimistic that your team is maybe a lot better than you thought at the beginning of the year?

COACH FERENTZ: Geez, people getting ahead of themselves? Really? Is that the opposite of everybody doom-and-gloomig it? Those two things happen. Usually if you lose a couple games, everything is terrible and the sky is falling, and when you win a couple, everything is great. Let's book those reservations now.

I think everybody realizes it's a long season. You're playing eight conference games, and anything can happen. That's why you play the whole schedule out, and I hope our team realizes that everything that's in front of us right now is going to be tough. We felt that way really the last ten games of our schedule; we thought each game would be contested pretty closely. That's really how that's panned out, and I expect more of the same. Reactions either good or bad, those things come with whatever the outcomes may be on the field.

But the reality is we've got four tough games ahead of us, and the only one that really matters right now is the one that we're going to play this Saturday.

Q. Do fans have -- has the perspective fans have, or everybody, changed in the last ten years where if you win you're going to the Rose Bowl; if you lose, fire everybody, more so maybe than when you started here?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes, I think that's fair to say. I think everybody has always had opinions. That's why people are drawn to sports. I think just the way they voice them and the manner in which

they get voiced and the magnitude at which they get voiced has probably changed. It used to be go down to your neighborhood gathering spot or the coffee house in the morning, what have you, and talk, and now a lot more of it is by the internet and a little bit more national than it used to be.

Probably with the broader the scope, maybe a little bit less accuracy at times. I think that's fair to say. And things are more extreme now.

But that's the world we live in, and it could be worse. We could be in politics, I guess. It could be a lot worse.

I voted the other day, by the way. Do you want to know what I did on my bye week? I voted Saturday, being a good American. Just being a patriot, that's all.

I encourage everybody else to do the same. I'm sure all of you will. That's what makes our country great, one of the things that makes it great. I'm not running for office, either, I promise you that.

Q. You saw a lot of football over the weekend, I'm sure. What's produced all of this scoring?

COACH FERENTZ: Poor defense, I guess. I don't know. But it's a mix. There's some really good quarterback play out there. But it is a good question, because boy, I can't remember this many points being put up. Particularly in the Big 12 last week, some real explosive offensive football teams. I guess it's a good thing we're not playing some of those teams.

But we're looking at a team right now that's averaging 460-whatever a game right now and about 35 points, 34 points a game.

Maybe I guess we're seeing more quarterbacks that are a little bit more prolific throwing the football. That seems to be the common denominator.

Q. One year ago Juice Williams starting missed something like 19 of 20 passes, now he's leading the Big Ten in total offense. When you see tape, what's been the biggest thing that he's improved on?

COACH FERENTZ: I think that's been experience. The first time we saw him, you saw the talent out there. That was at their place, I believe. You could see the talent. But it's playing quarterback stuff, just playing any position stuff. Certainly at quarterback position there's a lot to learn, and he's the centerpiece. The quarterback is the centerpiece of any offense, so it's a process, a never-ending process. But he's matured, and

he's a lot more experienced now, and he's certainly a confident player. That's a great attribute to have.

Q. We're about two thirds of the way into the season, and Shonn is putting up numbers just about as good as any back in the country. Do you think he should be getting a little bit more attention nationally in Heisman watches and things like that? It doesn't seem like that's happening. I'm wondering what your thoughts on that are.

COACH FERENTZ: It seems like those things all work out for themselves. We still have four games remaining. Somewhere in the last ten days I saw that he made a midseason All-American team, which is probably better than being on a preseason All-American team, but really the idea is to be on a final postseason All-American team.

But I don't think that's his goal when he plays. He's just out there trying to be as good a football player as he can be and help our team, and his attitude has been outstanding. Anyone who has seen him play knows that the numbers speak for themselves, and anybody that's seen him play would be even more enthusiastic with the way he is playing.

That being said, we have four tough games ahead. He knows that, our whole team knows that, and if he truly wants to be in that mix, first of all, it depends on what the other players in the mix are doing. And then secondly, most importantly, you as a player have to do what you need to do to justify that kind of discussion. It just gets down to playing well, but he's done that each and every Saturday in eight games now.

Q. Does Illinois's offense present the biggest challenge to your defense so far this season?

COACH FERENTZ: I guess that's fair to say. These guys are very, very prolific right now, very talented, very veteran, and led by a quarterback who has proven himself. He's a proven winner. You can look at what he did at Michigan a couple weeks ago, set records up there in Ann Arbor on the road, what he did last year leading that team to a victory against Ohio State, the No. 1 team. You look at those two games are two snapshots of what he's capable of doing, and he's going to be a great challenge. Their whole offensive team is going to be a great challenge, but certainly it starts at the quarterback.

Q. The old cliché, unstoppable force

versus immovable object?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll find out. I don't know how movable we are. They do a nice job. It's not just passing game, either. They do a great job in the running game, excellent receivers, good backs, line is doing a good job, so it's quite a challenge.

Q. Talk about Jason Ford. You had him a few times you thought and now he's at Illinois putting up some pretty good numbers.

COACH FERENTZ: He's playing well. He's a good football player. We thought that, and I think he's confirmed it. He's playing really well as a true freshman.

Q. It seems like you guys are running an extra linebacker a lot. What's the philosophy?

COACH FERENTZ: It's just a form of substituted defense. We've fooled around with a package similar to it going back to Texas Tech in 2001. I guess that's probably where it all got started. As I've said earlier in the year, it just kind of depends on the availability of players that we have, who fits, and we try to steer our packages towards our best personnel, the personnel fits that we're trying to do the best, and we've kind of found a little niche for that package right now.

Q. Who is coming through to make that -- who's shining for you guys to be able to use that defense?

COACH FERENTZ: I mean, it's more linebacker oriented. We take a defensive lineman out and insert another linebacker or a couple. Lance Tillison made a nice play at the end of the ballgame two weeks ago, so it's giving him a little bit of a roll. He's kind of an amphibious character, if you will, so it gives him a spot.

If you've got players available, you try to find a spot where it might work for them and work for us.

Q. Usually the thinking there is to get more defensive backs on the field. You guys are going toward more linebackers. What is the thinking there?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, it's a big guy who plays with his hand on the ground, trade it for a guy on his feet, and it's more three-man rush oriented. If you're a four-man front, which we are, it gives you another pass defender, a natural pass defender without trying to drop a down lineman. Some people do that, or some people take a down

lineman and have him walk and roam. We just don't think that fits with what we do.

Q. Did you guys run a lot of this last year against Illinois? I don't think you did.

COACH FERENTZ: Not a lot necessarily, no.

Q. You ran more option last year?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes.

Q. They try to use Ben a lot in different formations. How do you address that?

COACH FERENTZ: It's tough. He's a tough out. He's not only good on offense. He's excellent on offense, running the ball, catching the ball, excellent special teams. Ran back the kick, I believe it was, against Penn State last year. It was a huge play in that game, big return I think it's last week.

He's a great football player, and he's dangerous on all parts of the field. He'll catch the ball in the middle and has great ability to run afterwards, too. He's a big, strong, athletic guy who's really a dangerous performer.

Q. Have you heard about this green-out that the fans are talking about?

COACH FERENTZ: A little bit, yeah, a little bit. Right now my thoughts are on Illinois, period. It's not a prominent thought, but I'm not sure about all the details at this point. But it's good for fan enthusiasm, it's good for us. That's how I'll look at it.

Q. How do you balance maybe trying to promote an athlete -- say like a Brad Banks a few years ago. When did you maybe switch from just letting him do it on the field to maybe giving him a boost nationally recognition-wise?

COACH FERENTZ: I think, again, the first and foremost is the player has to be playing well, otherwise it's a paper campaign, if you will. But that being said, at some point if a guy is really having a great year, you know, you'd be remiss not to try to help him, without going overboard or being silly.

I mean, if Shonn keeps performing like this, first of all, anybody paying attention to going to notice it, and I think most people have. But again, you measure a guy's performance by the entire season, and at the end of the day, if he plays well, he'll probably get what he deserves to have coming for him. Where that line of demarcation is, I'm not certain to answer that. But

I thought the school did a good job regarding Brad's campaign, and unfortunately he ran up against a guy that was pretty good, too. You know, Carson Palmer had had a great year, which like when Chuck Long was involved, Bo Jackson unfortunately was right there, too.

That's usually the case, and I guess some years it's a little bit more clear than others, but the biggest thing is for Shonn to keep playing well.

Q. Is there much you can do personally with this, maybe go on another national radio show, get on ESPN and talk about it a little bit more often and let the marketing department handle the rest?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't know how much that stuff really handles the vote. I'm not trained in that area. Anybody that wants to talk about Shonn Green, I'll be happy to talk about him. That's a great subject. I'll be happy to talk about that. Again, I'm not sure where it ranks in terms of importance.

Q. Speaking of awards, the Draddy finalists were announced this week. Matt Kroul is a semifinalist. How deserving would he be of becoming a finalist in other words?

COACH FERENTZ: It would be outstanding. Any honor that would come Matt's way I think would be appropriate. We've had some guys, Mike Klinkenborg the last couple years, Mike Elgin before that, Matt Kroul in that same category has done a great job in the classroom. Academically he's been a great leader, tremendous character, and he's a great story. He kind of does it all and been very involved in community service, too, and what have you. So he's the total package.

Q. How is he able to balance all of that? We hear how time-consuming football and classes are.

COACH FERENTZ: Matt came here as a very mature guy, and it's a little bit like the Chad Greenway story. When Chad was here it was like being on vacation for him because of the workload he had at home. I know Matt is going through the same thing. Matt doesn't get many days off. We made a recruiting visit recently; I stopped out there on a Sunday afternoon. We got him out of some wood splitting or wood chopping chores, so he was glad to see us for that reason only, I think.

Matt has always been very mature, very, very organized with his approach, handles academics, athletics all the same way. The guy is a model citizen.

Q. How important is the passing game going to be down the stretch given that defenses are going to have to focus all their attention on Shonn?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, our goals have always been to be as balanced as possible. We don't want to be a one-dimensional team, run or pass. I think our passing game is improving weekly. It's been improving, and we still have an opportunity to grow.

So to answer your question, it's going to be important. If we're playing offense well, it means we're going to have the capability of doing both, and obviously if people just set out to stop one particular area, then you have to rely on the other, but it should make it a little bit easier to do that.

Q. The successful games on offense that you guys have had, do you feel you need to reinforce to the guys what type of effort it took to have that, or have they kind of caught on on their own?

COACH FERENTZ: No, we never assume anything. We're going to have to play hard, we know that.

The other thing is obviously just protecting the football. We've done that well the last few weeks. We didn't the two weeks prior to that, and it makes a huge difference in the outcome of things. Protecting the football and avoiding negative yardage plays, those two things offensively are things that really keep you from having success.

Q. You're not worried that they'll take that for granted now that they've done it a few times?

COACH FERENTZ: Hopefully not, but that's what we're going to keep coaching hard and hopefully our players will keep playing hard. I think they will.

Q. The bye week, what's the biggest challenge in transitioning?

COACH FERENTZ: Quite honestly I've forgotten. The one thing I remember is you get frustrated during bye weeks. That came to me somewhere around Thursday. It's a little bit like spring practice where you don't have a game sitting right in front of you. The focus is a little bit different.

All that being said, I thought it was a good week, and we'll see what happens. Hopefully we

have a good three days here starting today.

Q. Top scoring defense in the nation, I believe it's 11 points a game. I know there's a lot of football to go, but could you talk about the confidence your defense is playing with right now?

COACH FERENTZ: I think the thing they've learned or at least they've seen or that's been illustrated is when they play well and play together and play smart, we've had good results. And if you look at the scoring drives, it's not 100 percent, but the scoring drives, at least in conference play, there's usually a play or two in those drives where we open the door and give them an opportunity to really gain some momentum.

That's just defense. If you're giving up big plays, either by penalty or a big play in general, usually it comes back and gets you. It's kind of like walking guys in baseball, late innings, so the focus there is just being consistent, not losing sleep over the six-yard gains but being consistent and being smart.

Q. How improved is the secondary, if at all, this year?

COACH FERENTZ: Again, I'm always kind of guarded. We still have four games. But I think we're working hard back there. I think the guys have a good attitude like everybody on our football team, and I think we're making progress, incremental progress.

But the proof is in the pudding. We still have four games to play out, so we'll know a lot more in a month.

Q. With Shonn getting all the yards and a little more attention, kind of lost in the shuffle is the offensive line. Do they take pride in that, seeing their back get a little bit more recognition?

COACH FERENTZ: I think they do. I think just offensive production in general makes linemen feel better, and certainly when a back is running well, it's a direct reflection. I'd be remiss if I didn't include our receiver blocking in that, too. When you start getting the bigger runs, that's usually an indicator that the guys on the outside are working, also, and they've been doing a good job there, so I think that's great to see.

I think everybody is figuring out that if everybody gives that little extra bit of effort maybe something good will happen.

Linemen, there aren't many stats they can hang their hats on, I guess, so I think it's a good thing for them.

Q. What are your thoughts on Ron Zook just in the times you've coached against him?

COACH FERENTZ: He's an excellent football coach. I think the work that he's done at Illinois, without even going back, he's had a tremendous career every step of the way. But if you just look at the turnaround that they've made in a short period of time, taking that team to the Rose Bowl last year speaks volumes. It's not easy to do. Not many people have done that, and it's a real credit to Coach Zook and his staff.

Q. Going back to the bye week a little bit, how was your routine altered? Did you get a little bit more time away, at home, to relax? Did everybody have a three-day weekend?

COACH FERENTZ: Not everybody, but players did. Well, not three days, either, but close. They had Friday, Saturday. But pretty much for us, we were in here three days and then everybody hit the road Thursday and Friday recruiting. I say everybody; I didn't, and the coordinators didn't. But our seven permissible guys were out recruiting Thursday and Friday, and some guys were traveling back Friday night. Most everybody got back Saturday at some point and had Saturday off, and then we came back in Sunday and had a normal week.

But the big difference is we were home at night every night last week. We weren't up here watching tape and that type of thing, which is nice. Nice to have dinner at home, even if it was a little later than normal, but still nice.

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