

October 30, 2007



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: I'd like to congratulate a couple guys that received honors this past week. Certainly Mike Klinkenberg, we're very excited about that, him receiving the National Football Foundation College Hall of Fame Scholarship. It's very prestigious, and I think one of 15 guys if I'm not mistaken across the country, and that's all divisions, so it's a very prestigious award.

I think just to put it in perspective, you look at a guy like Mike Elgin, who's a three-time academic All-American engineering major, we nominated him, too, and he didn't make the cut. So it just puts it in perspective how tough it is to be one of the recipients. We're very happy for Mike. It's a great thing.

Norm Parker took credit, so that was a reflection of his coach, and my response to Mike was it just makes it even that much more impressive that he could overcome Norm's influence (laughter). That's a really great thing.

And then, obviously, Ryan Donahue to be honored this past weekend, happy to see that, too, and he was a big, big part of us having a chance to win on Saturday. It was great news.

Injury front right now, Adam Shada for sure will be out of the game this week. He has no chance to play. Chad Geary has a chance. I'm not sure how effective he'll be with that elbow trying to play defensive line; that might be a little tough. And right now it looks like Devan Moylan and Jordan McLaughlin will be out again. I think everybody else has a realistic chance to be ready to go.

Captains will be Bryan Mattison, Mike Humpal, Albert Young, Tom Busch, same group as the last couple weeks.

Certainly, Saturday was a very good win for us. Any win right now is significant and important than for us, and I think the way the guys fought and rallied, it certainly was great to see that.

We're extremely excited to get the win, and now we move on to Northwestern, another challenge. We go up the road to Chicago. It's a team that's beaten us the last few times we've played them, and they're a very, very veteran ball club like a lot of the teams we've played this year. I think they've got eight or nine starters back on each side of the ball, at least guys that have started against us. They're very well coached, play extremely hard, and they're a good football team.

They've got some momentum going right now, too. They've won three out of their last four games, and that fifth game I believe was the Purdue game where they had the lead well into the fourth quarter and were playing extremely well there, too. But they're playing with confidence, they've got veteran players, and it'll be a tough challenge for us, and we'll see what we can do, see what we can pull together this week and get ready for Saturday.

Q. Have you seen yet or figured out what turned that game Saturday around?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I wish I knew. Somebody asked me that on the teleconference, and I wish I knew. Basically, Michigan State just played a great first half. They were playing the way you're supposed to play, and we weren't. And as a result we were lucky to be down just by the margin that we were. Fortunately we rallied a little bit and played a little bit better in the second half in all phases, and I think our special teams gave us a chance to be successful. So that was good.

I thought in that first half, those are about the only three guys that really were performing for us, and unfortunately they were.

Q. Could Albert walk on Sunday?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's beat up, but he has been for the past month, and that's what happens when you're a running back. He's ready to go, and he's in good spirits and hopefully will be ready to go today.

Q. How about Klink with his broken hand?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he has a good chance. Obviously, it just happened on Saturday

so he went back in the game, he was cleared to play, but it's painful, as you might imagine. He'll be casted up this week, but they'll modify the cast Thursday. So he'll be there. Can he play effectively, that will be the question that remains to be seen. We're hoping that will be the case, but we'll have to find out on Saturday. We have to play him both ways, I think.

Q. (No microphone.)

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he should be fine. He's past -- ended up being more of a routine -- a day or two longer but a routine deal. He'll practice this week. He worked out Saturday and yesterday, so he's ready to go.

Q. How about Damian's foot sprain?

COACH FERENTZ: Good news there. He woke up Sunday not too bad and ran some on Sunday, and we think he'll practice today. Unless something happens during the week, we caught a good break there. It didn't end up being real significant.

Q. Shada's is ankle?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's got an ankle. It's a lot of swelling right now, a lot of fluid in there. The good news, it's not a, quote-unquote, high ankle, so that's good news.

Next week or the week after, I'm not quite sure. I guess after that we're out a week. But at least it's not one of those deals where it's five, six weeks, which it can be.

Q. Ankle sprain?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, kind of a normal sprain. Significant, but those high ankles can be a little sticky.

Q. Were these injuries related to fatigue, which is related to the fact that you don't have an open week?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think so. I think it's just some years are different than others. We were having injuries early in the year. I mean, Tony Moeaki is a great illustration. That's just bad luck. Not only do you separate your elbow, but then after your elbow calms down, 10 minutes later you find out you've got a broken hand, too, on the same play. And what happened on that play, you've seen that happen to a thousand guys a thousand times. It wasn't anything dramatic.

Brodell's, too, that wasn't a dramatic injury like Luke Swan, if you saw that one on TV or on tape, Luke Swan's you could see, geez, that's not good. But Andy's was just one of those things. It

seems like we're getting a lot of -- it's our year for those, I guess. Hopefully we've run the course and gotten it out of the way.

Q. Does the fact that this team can play so much better have to do with a lot of young teams seem to play that much better at home? Obviously, it's easier to play at home always, but can you pinpoint the difference between kind of the team we see at Kinnick and the team we see on the road?

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't thought about that one too much. I guess the good news is at least we're playing better at Kinnick. I think we're 30 out of 35, I saw it somewhere. We departed from that for a while there, too. So at least maybe we're back on track, and now the next step is to find it out on the road.

It probably factors in certainly. Playing on the road requires a little different focus and concentration, and right now pretty much everything is an adventure for us. Yeah, it's another challenge for us this week.

Q. You talked about Karl Klug earlier in the year. He's having a pretty good --

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, Karl really caught our eye in camp. It seems like in the spring, but it was camp. He's been doing some good things. He's another guy that, speaking of injuries, had that back surgery a while back, so he really is playing catch-up, but was able to train and did some good things. He's still not physically mature the way he's going to be, but he's making good inroads.

He seems to have a good mentality and a nice little knack of playing in there, which is kind of unusual. We thought he'd be on outside guy, but he's shown a propensity maybe for having a feeling inside there, which is good.

He's already played 60 snaps, but at least he'll hopefully get back in the picture, and I think his foot is starting to come around a little bit.

Q. Your game against Northwestern last year, was that Bacher's kind of, I don't want to say, coming out party, but was that his first game where he kind of grabbed the job?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he had shown signs and just kind of nailed it against us, really played a good game, and he's taken off since then. He's playing very, very well for them, throws it very well, leads the team, and they do a real good job of catching, too. I mean, they're very efficient. That's one thing to say, we're going to throw the ball

around, but those guys, they really throw, they run good routes and they catch the ball, and they just do a very good job. They're very proficient at what they do.

Q. How about Tyrell Sutton?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, fortunately he's getting it warmed up. He's been back I guess the last two weeks now and obviously got more work this past weekend. He's an excellent football player. He'll be an excellent weapon.

Q. How would you classify him?

COACH FERENTZ: I would just say he's good at everything. He's a very good runner, good in the screens, good in the passing game, very versatile and looks to be a very smart football player, very well-rounded. For what they do offensively, he fits in perfectly. I'm trying to remember the guy -- he's playing somewhere in the NFL, the guy they had in 2001.

Q. Anderson?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think that's who I'm thinking about. Was he 2000, 2001? He was with the Steelers? Yeah, but a good player, can run inside, run outside and catch the ball. Doesn't balk at anything. He's a good football player.

Q. Seems like the football team has gone through a lot of ups and downs. Do you see ups and downs like that at practice?

COACH FERENTZ: Unfortunately, yes. I think that's why we see them on Saturdays, too. Probably the only good news last Saturday was it was only half of it instead of the full 60. We have not practiced day in and day out the way you need to, we just have a lot of moving parts right now, a little younger than you like to be, and sometimes that comes with the territory. You don't like it, you don't want to accept it, and we don't, but that's one of the challenges we're facing right now, just trying to mount more consistency. It really shows up offensively.

As bad as it appeared, and it was pretty bad that first half, you know, you go back and look at four or five plays, it just really changed the complexion of things, either makable plays or whatever series it was, we were 1st and 15 right off the bat. You remember that one series where we had a false start. So it's just kind of been a pattern in there, and we're not a good 1st and 15 team. We're not a great 1st and 10 team right now. Those kinds of things really affect a team offensively, and that's where we're at.

Q. In your coaching career is it unusual for a team to come out and play as well as they seemed to have in the second half versus the first half?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, the first thing you hope is you don't play as poorly as we did, and again, I don't say that to take away from -- Michigan State was doing what they were supposed to do. We knew they were a good team and they were playing aggressively, we weren't. So that's the result. You end up being down a couple scores. You're lucky if it's only a couple.

I think our guys just kind of made up their mind that maybe we need to start playing here. Maybe we can do better. Certainly we were hoping that we could, and I think they took it upon themselves to get that done, and fortunately did it in the second half, and at least we gave ourselves a chance to go into overtime.

I don't know if there's any magic formula for it. Sometimes guys -- kind of like Wisconsin 2005 and 2003. In 2003, we did have a traumatic moment. That's when the Robert Gallery threatened several people physically, but that didn't happen in 2005 or last week. But at least we came out and played in that second half and looked like a football team.

Q. Is it a good thing for a young team like this to come away from a win with so many things that they can point to that they need to --

COACH FERENTZ: I hope so. Yeah, I hope so. The first lesson is if you go out and compete, you give yourself a chance. And if you don't, you have no chance. At least hopefully we learned that Saturday. Not that we didn't know it, but I think we were reminded of that.

Hopefully it will be good for our confidence. But I mean, we've had to fight for everything this year. But certainly Saturday I'm not sure how many people would have thought, boy, we can pull that one off being down like we were, especially the way we're built right now. But it was a team win. You know, the defense complemented the offense, special teams helped us out, and we came up with some big plays, too, which is obviously huge.

Q. Northwestern, I know every year the team has its own personality... talk about the specific challenges that maybe come with playing Northwestern.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think for us it's as simple as this: The last two years they've been prepared to play, and then they've played the

full 60 and we haven't. I think we were prepared certainly in 2005. It was a good football game. But we didn't finish and they did. I know a lot of the focus in that game was on the defense and then the onsides kick.

I thought we lost that game personally earlier in the fourth quarter. We had a series of plays that were less than spectacular, three plays, I'm not going to give them to you, the sequence, I don't want to bore you right now, but then we missed a field goal afterwards. But if we had executed on that series, we probably would have scored a touchdown or at least had the ball inside the ten. You'd like to think you'd hit a field goal there and that would have been the game. So to me that really started our erosion in that ballgame.

Then last year you had a team that showed up and you had another team that didn't. We were lucky to be 21-7 in that run because that score was not indicative of the beating that they gave us. We might have won the coin toss. Outside of that, that was it. I'm not sure we did. We probably lost that, too.

Q. You have a number of red shirt freshmen and some sophomores. Could you just talk about their performance? Are they playing better than you thought they would?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, because I didn't think they would be. I mean, that's easy, right there. That's one of the positives right now. I wouldn't say it was a master plan. We did talk about playing young guys more liberally to help our special teams, and it's expanded beyond that a little bit more certainly.

But the good thing is we've seen growth with all those guys. It was easy -- the other day certainly, we were down, Iwebema early in the game, and our defensive players, really I think they basically have played three games in the last two weeks if you count how many snaps they've played. And when Ballard jumped in there and Clayborn and Coleman had to go in, I think those guys did a good job. They didn't hurt us. In fact they helped us. They added something to the mix. When you have that going on, that's good.

To me Allen Reisner is a guy who's kind of a quiet guy there, but he's improving, he's growing. Our receivers have no choice. They're making progress, and you look at a guy like James Cleveland, I thought he had a spectacular game. I don't think we had a guy catch more than two balls. That's what happens when you complete five. But Cleveland really blocked extremely well, as well as anybody we've had maybe outside of Kasper, who

was a little deranged. But he was a big part of our success.

When you run the ball -- usually you don't get big runs unless the outside guys are really working hard, and James had some critical blocks on a couple of Albert's runs. So there's some things going on where we're encouraged about that, but we've just got to -- every practice, everything we do right now is really important because of our youth and inexperience.

Q. Going back to Albert, what did it mean to have that type of performance from him on Saturday, especially in the second half?

COACH FERENTZ: We had no chance without it. I mean, it's just -- for us to have a chance, our best guys, we talk about this every week, right now it's even more magnified. Our oldest and most experienced guys have to play well. Albert has been playing well all season long, but it was good to see him really have an opportunity to get it going, and he really responded and did a great job, I thought, played a great football game.

But we're going to need him every week down the road, as with Damian, also, and then Tom Busch is right back there, too, our other senior, doing a nice job blocking, so that was good to see.

Q. Is that going to get formulated, thought out, how many touches for Albert?

COACH FERENTZ: It'll help if we can do that, but all that being said, now you have to think, we're going to have to complete some passes. I mean, we just have to do it. We've got to be able to be more productive in the passing game, and otherwise it's going to be a little tougher to run that football. We have to make strides there to try to hold serve at the run game, but we've got to continue to get the passing game going here, at least work on that. The big play at the end of the game was certainly big from a scoring standpoint, but it was less -- I think just like we talked about the game itself, for us to be able to convert one of the worst situations for us to be in, for our guys to see that they can do it, that was good.

They brought the blitz, the line did a nice job picking it up, Albert made his block, so we had clean protection and a great throw and catch by Jake and Paul Chaney, so it was really -- hopefully that'll maybe get us going a little bit, too. When we execute we're not a bad football team, but the problem again is consistency.

Q. When you use the term establish the run, do you have to sometimes run unsuccessfully for a while before it opens up?

COACH FERENTZ: Usually you do. It's rare when you just come out and run the ball, boom, boom, boom right off the bat. It happens a couple of times but it's usually something you've got to work into and something you've got to be patient with.

But just to establish the run -- again, defenses can take anything away from you they want, so if you're one-dimensional, it's just -- if all you can do is run, that's fine, but you'd better have some option in your tackle and we're not built for that, but we'd better be able to do both.

Q. That said, you didn't play a lot of passes against Michigan State but you ran real well. Is that a statement about how well your offensive line played, or did they not have the right defense out there?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, I mean, I thought our guys for the most part did a good job in the running game. It wasn't perfect, but we made progress. Our pass protection I think is continually getting a little bit better, but again, the consistency factor is what it comes down to there.

We started right off on a third down, let one of their better guys go right through the middle of our line. That's not good. That was a mental thing more than a physical. It wasn't physical at all, it was just a communication and mental thing. We've got a variety of problems or challenges there. But that's what we're working through. But, I thought we made progress.

The guys kept competing. We wouldn't have had a chance to win that football game if they didn't compete. They executed some things very well. The touchdown route was really beautifully executed. Pugh's real tough run there, tough yards there, the two yards he got, just blocked as clean as you could block it, so it was a great call by Ken and great execution. We did some good things, and that was good to see. Hopefully we'll get some confidence there.

Q. The crowd has obviously been a big factor in the past two wins. Is part of the challenge getting the team to bring that same energy on the road?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes and no. One thing, we appreciate our fans. They're the best. I've said that many times. But we also know it's our job to get our fans into the game.

Our fans, one thing different about our place maybe as opposed to a place like

Philadelphia, our people come to the game wanting to cheer and they want to be into the game and they want to cheer the home team. But we didn't give them much to get excited about in that first 30 minutes on Saturday. Number one, I'm appreciative when we came out of the locker room they were still here in the stadium, and that was great. Then they knew what to do once we started playing, which they always do. Our fans are great.

But I guess, yeah, we need to have the mentality that we've got to play no matter what, wherever you're at. It's football. You can't be a successful team if you can only win at home or if you can only win at 11:00 or whatever, if you get into that kind of mindset. You're going to have some problems.

Q. Was that the most heinous missed call you've ever seen in your life, or was that maybe sort of a purpose --

COACH FERENTZ: I've seen a few, but that was -- I'm not going to go down that road. But yeah, that seemed pretty obvious. Just seemed pretty obvious.

Q. You could make the argument that your guys were looking at --

COACH FERENTZ: I mean, that wasn't part of my thought process and I doubt it was part of the official's thought process. Am I allowed to talk about this stuff? Am I going to get fined? Yeah, it just happened. It was one of those things that happened.

Q. So there's no part of that that was like a manager getting thrown out of a game?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not that smart, no. I don't think that was the key to the game, but anyway, we just executed better. It was a call that we thought they missed that was pretty obvious.

Q. Did you hear anything back from the Big Ten when you sent it in?

COACH FERENTZ: No, we're in that process. I'm pretty sure I know what I'll hear. It's kind of like the game with Connecticut and Louisville. Those phone calls don't do you a lot of good.

Q. At least they got a call in that case.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, like I said, it doesn't do you any good.

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