

October 30, 2012



An Interview With:

KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Our captains this week are same four guys. We've got James Vandenberg and James Ferentz, on offense and then James Morris and Chris Kirksey defensively. They'll represent the teams as captains at the coin toss.

Going to Indiana, they are team that's really playing well. They're coming off a good win. It was on the road, obviously. But maybe even more impressive, but just the way they've played in general and how they've played in their losses. Last couple losses, one point to Navy, three points in a very open game against Ohio State. And the week before we played Michigan State, they really had them on their heels, played a great first half, ended up losing by four points.

So they're a much better football team than we played last year -- I think, on both sides of the football. They've got an excellent kicker on top of it. So it will be a big challenge for us, and we'll get back to work today.

Q. Kirk, defensively the last couple of weeks, you trended down a little bit. How concerned are you with the defense right now?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm concerned about everything right now -- offense, defense, special teams and just how we play collectively. That's our task.

It won't be easy this week. It's another high tempo group the third week in a row. So if there's a positive in that, at least we're catching it all in one stretch here. It just gets down to us playing better collectively, and I'm confident we'll do that.

Q. Outside of Mark Weisman, is everyone in pretty good shape?

ASAP sports
...when all is said, we're done.®

visit our archives at asapsports.com

COACH FERENTZ: We took Mark off the depth chart. I don't think he'll be able to go this week. He's stretching it. So he'll get treatment. He'll try to recoup this week, and we'll see where we're at next Tuesday. I think there's a chance we'll probably know more here in the next 48 hours, where he's going to be long term, but I think there's a fair chance we'll get him back next week.

Q. How was Damon on Sunday, the day after? Head?

COACH FERENTZ: No, he was just sore in general. He hasn't played in a month and a half. First time he's been hit in quite some time. That was his comment, but he had a smile on his face. It's a good feeling for him because he's not been sore for quite a while.

Q. Keenan Davis and Brad Rogers both good to go?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see. Keenan is fine. Brad, it's going to be touch and go. It was last week. He dressed and just didn't feel up to it on Saturday. We'll wait and see.

Q. Drew Ott, what does he bring you at defensive end? Was he a guy you wanted to hold out?

COACH FERENTZ: In a perfect world we would have. He brings depth, first of all, which is what we need. With Riley McMinn out, we just felt like it was an opportunity because we need to be playing six, seven, eight guys up there.

Clearly, Riley couldn't go last week, and I don't know if he'll be able to go for a couple of weeks here. So we just felt like it's an advantageous move. He's been practicing really well. He's a smart player. He's picked things up pretty quickly. Doesn't have the strength or girth you would hope at this point, but that's what happens with first year guys.

So in two phases, it gives us depth and a

Coach Ferentz – 10.30.12

guy that can help us win right now, which is important. And secondly, I think it's going to help him as we look forward to. I think it's a win-win situation.

Q. Is it a lot like Alan Reisner?

COACH FERENTZ: Not to that extent. Drew can hold his own. We've seen him practice against Scherff out there. He's a lot further ahead than Allen was at that time. It's not quite that mismatch, and we're not at that point obviously.

I think he's done a nice job in practice. Anxious to see him play actually.

Q. Are you concerned about the defense this Saturday. Indiana attacks a little differently than Northwestern.

COACH FERENTZ: They're different than Northwestern, certainly. And Northwestern was two different teams going into the game. They shifted towards one -- in one direction Saturday. So it really became an option game, option attack game, if you will, with a quarterback that's an outstanding runner.

But both these guys will run the football. I think the difference is, if they're on the move, they're looking to throw the ball, and then they'll pull it down and go. They do have some cold runs, but they're intent, if they break the pocket, it's more to throw the football where last week it was a little different story. That's kind of the challenge here.

These guys have really good skill players. Their line is much improved, I'll start there. Their veteran players are playing well, but their new guys and some young guys are really playing well up front. So they're better there.

The running back was good last year. He's still good, and they've got really good guys out there on the perimeter. Two of them have really good size as well. So they give you a lot of challenges.

Q. What's been the biggest hole in your rushing defense the last two weeks?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm trying to think about two weeks ago. I'm trying to get caught up there. I think that was a little different chapter. Saturday one of the run plays was a guy who made a play the week before that went 80, and that would have been 120 if he could have gone 120. That's probably one of the most impressive plays in the game, quite frankly, was Micah

tracking him down. That was unbelievable. Great effort on his part.

And outside of that, the thing that really hurt us was the quarterback, a quarterback that's a very dangerous player. And the week before is a little bit different scenario. But it still gets down to playing good team defense. Everybody playing better technique and being where they need to be and trusting each other that the guy next to him's going to be right there. Just having a little better understanding and a little trust there.

Q. How do you practice against a quarterback like that?

COACH FERENTZ: It's hard. I think the big question would have been what percentage will we see? You really had to practice for both offenses. As it turns out, we saw one a very small percentage of the time. You go down, and you just practice, practice against what you have. Somebody has to try to simulate that.

If we had somebody like that and we had that situation before, you'd probably have those guys playing for you on the first offense.

Q. What would you say the calling card is for this Indiana team?

COACH FERENTZ: I would say aggressiveness, number one. They really play with an aggressive attitude, and it's reflected statistically, the tackles for losses they have, that type of thing.

And they've got some different players. They've got some veteran guys. Some guys have changed positions, but they're really playing with a lot of confidence, and they're playing hard. That's the biggest difference. The whole team is playing hard, but the defense is really playing hard.

Q. Does it depend on the scheme, do they do a lot of blitzing?

COACH FERENTZ: They come out in blitz, but it's not off the charts. I wouldn't describe them as just an off the charts type blitz team. They're aggressive players. They have guys on the back end that run well and aren't afraid to hit. I think their linebackers have been very active, and the core of their -- the starting point is their inside guys on defense. Those guys are both veteran players. They're both very good players, very disruptive. We had our time with them last year, our guys.

Q. As you were watching Indiana, do you see any similarities between that team and your team the second year you were here?

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't thought that much about it, comparing us and them. The one thing you're seeing about them is they really haven't been out of any game. They're playing hard. That's the first thing, I would say. They're playing hard. They've got a good scheme. They believe in it. The players believe in it, and that's important. They're certainly making progress. They're a much better team than what we saw.

If you watch our tape from last year, it's a very different team, I think.

Q. The passing game seems to be based on a lot of perimeter passes. James has got a strong arm, an accurate arm. What do you like about the perimeter passing game?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not sure I follow that. We throw the ball to pretty much everybody. Our backs caught a couple last week. Tight ends catch them. We try to utilize everybody we have, and really the defense kind of dictates where the ball goes most of the time.

I don't know that it's strictly perimeter throwing, but just we try to mix it up.

Q. It appears to be a lot of hitches and not a lot of yards after the catch. Is there something else you could do?

COACH FERENTZ: We're open to suggestion if you have any. I don't want to sound like Cam Newton, but we're open to suggestions. Yeah, we're trying to throw more than hitches and outs, that's for sure. Trying.

Q. How would you characterize the mindset of your football team right now?

COACH FERENTZ: I'll let you know more today. They were fine on Sunday. It's the last time I really saw them. We're a team that's lost four straight games, and we've got three to go. Our mindset, I hope, is that we're going to get ready to play Indiana and go down and do a nice job.

Q. You have a younger team. Is that more of a concern than with a veteran group?

COACH FERENTZ: Not necessarily. You could argue younger players are more resilient. You could argue that. I don't know if it's true or not.

I don't think anybody's hanging their heads. I didn't detect that Sunday. I'm confident we'll come in and have a good week of work.

Q. You said earlier that you're concerned but confident. What makes you confident?

COACH FERENTZ: Our players. We have good players, and we have good coaches, and there's still four games to go. Our intention is to have a good week of practice and play well Saturday.

Q. Do you feel like you guys are close, or do you have to improve a lot over the next week and through the season?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, we were probably closer in our first two Big Ten games. You could look at those games and say, hey, we played pretty well, especially given what's happened since that. If you look at the whole picture in its entirety.

One thing about football, every week's a different story. No team's the same week to week. I think you just look around the conference in the country, and you see that. What we need to do is just worry about where we're at this week. We know what our challenges are from an injury situation or being on the road and all those things that factor into every game and take what we have and see what we can do about coming out with a win.

Q. You're talking about you found Tobin somehow, walk-on from Dyersville. I think he grew six inches or something like that in high school, crazy story like that.

COACH FERENTZ: I think so. Don't quote me on that one.

Q. And now he's your left tackle. Can you talk about the journey there. There had to be some light bulb moment for him.

COACH FERENTZ: The thing about Matt -- first of all, Reese was very interested in him. He visited here officially -- it was a midweek visit. I remember he came down for a basketball game. So Reese, it wasn't just like any guy walking in here, one of those deals. Reese really liked him a lot.

I think the thing that stood out about Matt most during the early years was he was a tough,

competitive guy. He worked really hard. He had some work to do, but he was a tough competitive guy. He showed that all the time at practice.

We haven't played him at tackle, I don't think, period. But over the last couple of years -- not this year, but the last couple of years, we've worked him out. There was a backup. He's not what you would say -- you wouldn't say, okay, that's a natural move, but for whatever reason he seems to be one of those guys that's pretty proficient and pretty productive.

So I think that's what's allowed him to play at guard over the last two years and then just seemed like the most logical thing to do was get a more experienced guy out there for the long term here because Scherff isn't coming back. Our attitude is get the most veteran guy out there.

Matt has a great attitude. He works hard. It wasn't like moving the earth last week when we slid him out there. He jumped right in there and did a good job. I thought he played really well.

Q. Was he a guy in practice who was up against Clayborn a lot? Was there some tackling there?

COACH FERENTZ: At times, at times, he was out there when we shifted him. But he was playing both guard and tackle. If it wasn't Clayborn, it was Klug. He's not bad either. Two pretty good guys.

Q. He came up the hard way, basically.

COACH FERENTZ: Most guys do. Unless you come in and start right away, it doesn't happen too often. Most of those guys pay their dues.

Q. How did Walsh grade out?

COACH FERENTZ: Okay. He played like a young player, and Blythe did too. Blythe has played a couple of games, like Bullock, he's missed a couple. It's one thing when a veteran guy misses a couple of games and goes in. When a young guy does it, you're starting from scratch. I think he'll be a lot more confident and fluid this week. Hopefully with all three guys that are playing guard right now, I think we'll see them play a little faster this week just because of the experience factor.

Q. Sometimes in the past you called this a developmental program. How important

is it to have those extra weeks of December by being Bowl eligible and getting to a Bowl?

COACH FERENTZ: Bowls are important for a lot of reasons. That's one, but they're important for a lot of reasons. It's like everything right now. The best thing we can do to help that or any situation is take care of this week. That's what we're really worried about. The rest of stuff will fall in place or won't fall in place, depending on what we do this week.

And the other three, but this is the only one that counts right now. We can't do much about the next three.

Q. Your defense has mixed in more nickel and dime than in the past. What do you think are the results of that?

COACH FERENTZ: Some good, some bad, fairly obviously. We were in a subbed out defense the other day, and one of the plays that we gave up, but it really didn't -- it wasn't the personnel. It was the way we played the defense. That's usually the case. We have a little bit more depth in the back end right now. That's part of the reason, rationale for that, plus the people you're playing. How they put them out there factors into it.

Q. You have a true freshman Sean Draper playing out there. What do you think of the way the younger guys are playing in the secondary at this point?

COACH FERENTZ: He's done pretty well. It's a weekly thing. I think he's improving. He's playing well on special teams when he gets a chance. We're seeing some growth there.

Henry Krieger Coble, throw him out there. A guy who's not playing a lot, but just watching him the last couple of weeks on the kick return team. He's doing things that are really exciting. Nobody's going to write about that, for obvious reasons. It's not real dramatic. But as a coach, you watch those things and you say, here's a guy that's doing some good things too. Those are the little things we're looking for.

In Sean's case, he's done a nice job on special teams, and he's competing out there hard at corner when he gets out there. That's a good thing.

Q. What were your thoughts what you were able to get out of Lowery considering it's

his first playing time in a few weeks.

COACH FERENTZ: I think he's healthy again. You can just tell in practice he's confident with his physical status where prior to that, he wasn't. He was -- I don't know what percent he's at, but it's pretty clear he wasn't playing, or practicing the way like it would make you feel like, yeah, he can go in there and play well. That's kind of where it's at. That's the hump you have to get over when you're coming off an injury.

Q. You guys have 12 true freshmen, I believe, in the depth chart this week. Does that say a lot about why you're 4-4 and maybe what's going wrong overall? I know it's a loaded question.

COACH FERENTZ: How many did we have on the depth chart two weeks ago? I didn't chart it. Up at Michigan State. I don't know. I don't follow that stuff. I know this. When guys get hurt, somebody has to come in. I do know that. Players don't fall out of the sky.

But injuries are part of football. That happens. I just know this. We have enough to be successful this week, and that's really what I'm worried about. I didn't count how many guys we had on our depth chart. We have enough to win. We just have to find a way to get it done.

Q. Kirk, are we overlooking the contribution that James Ferentz is making to this team, do you think? Can you talk about that a little bit? Maybe you've been reluctant in the past to talk about it, but his clock is ticking also.

COACH FERENTZ: He's playing well. I was expecting that. I would be really disappointed if he wasn't. He's played a lot of football for us. If you look at him, probably Hyde and Morris, I would guess -- I'm just guessing without thinking this out -- are our most seasoned players. Those guys have played a lot of football, the three of those guys, and they're all playing at a high level.

Q. 33, 34, something like that.

COACH FERENTZ: I'm guessing Hyde is close to that, and I don't know, and I'm guessing Morris is really close to that too. All three of those guys are doing a good job too.

Q. Once again, you pass by James and go to the other guys. Are you reluctant to talk about James?

COACH FERENTZ: No, he's a good player. I'm not reluctant. He's fun to coach. He's aggressive. He loves football. That's just -- and he's got a little spirit about him. That part's pretty good. He's not 6'4", never will be, but he's a pretty good football player, and he's playing well for us. So it's a good thing.

Q. Kirk, do you ever --

COACH FERENTZ: Overcoming his coaching.

Q. That you could use Bullock and Weisman together but not necessarily --

COACH FERENTZ: Only if we get them on the field at the same time.

Q. Not as a fullback, tailback, but use them both as running backs in your offense? Or does one have to be a fullback when they're together?

COACH FERENTZ: It's funny that you mention that -- not funny, but interesting that you mention that because my mind's racing here. I'm flashing back to like the Bengals did it when they played the 49ers, whatever year that would have been. They had two running back type guys in their backfield. I only know that because we had Vardell and Metcalfe in Cleveland, so we did some research on that one.

Damon is a very versatile guy. Mark is versatile in that he can play running back, fullback. Damon can play receiver, running back. I wouldn't put him at fullback. There are some options, but the first trick is to get them both on the field healthy together. We'll look forward to that day, and then we'll think about it then.

Q. I know you guys are in the complex more and you don't hear, but do you feel there's more outside noise coming in this year than a lot of years?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if I can rate years. There was noise in '99, I'm pretty sure. In fact, there was noise as I was getting here, not only before I got here. When I was getting here, there was some noise. Noise is not uncommon to sports, I think. It's just a matter of where the noise is. Back in the old days, it used to be in taverns and pubs, coffee shops. Now it's just a little bit more. You don't have to go as hard or look as hard to find it or hear it, I guess. It's part of sports.

I'm driving into work the other day, and they were talking about -- a couple of radio guys talking about the Tigers being out of it, and I guess they were pretty prophetic because they are out of it. But at the point, they were 0-2, and they're one of the most resilient teams in baseball. I don't think the Tigers put the flag up, and I know San Francisco hasn't either.

That's sports. People are going to talk about anything, whether it's going good, bad, or indifferent. If you're involved in it, you'd better -- we all like riding in parades. I've said that before. It's a lot more fun. But when you do things competitively, it's going to go both ways. What you need to focus on is what's in front of you, and try to make it go the right way.

Q. You say it's more pervasive.

COACH FERENTZ: Not pervasive. There's just more. There's more avenues for it now. Back in the old days, people had to talk to each other and whatever. There's a lot more ways to get things out. Or write letters.

Q. Do you see it seep into the players more now?

COACH FERENTZ: No. Players walk the campus. I don't think so. But you probably would have to ask them. I don't know.

Q. Do you see in college football, I guess mostly, sometimes a lack of perspective? There's always dips. Ohio State was 6-6 last year. Florida was 6-6. Auburn goes from national title to whatever they are now. Is it -- do you think it's more difficult now to coach in that environment where fans are drawn almost week by week they're either --

COACH FERENTZ: If you let it, yeah. If you let it. If you've got rabbit ears, yeah. But I would say this. It was tough coaching 30 years ago if you had rabbit ears. Marv Levy said it really well. I heard him at a seminar one time.

If you spent too much time listening to the people in the stands, you're going to be sitting right up there with them. It's true. It's anything you do in life. You have beliefs in what you do, and you try to be as smart as you can. Anybody who makes decisions isn't going to be 100 percent. Especially regarding people, it's impossible to be 100 percent.

So you do what you think's best, and you try to approach things in a smart way, and then you

go. The process is always taking care of things, and it's just a matter of how you -- again, I grew up in Pittsburgh where they still believe in stability, and they address issues rather than throwing people off the boat. But there's a lot of ways to do things too.

So that's just how you look at it.

Q. Sometimes it seems like money is also an issue.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, absolutely.

Q. And your contract gets thrown out a lot. Do you see that as --

COACH FERENTZ: Absolutely. I mean, that's the real world. That has changed in 30 years obviously. Everything in college football has changed because of the TV and conferences, and that's what conference realignment is all about. Anybody that's not cognizant of that would be really focused or really sheltered.

But that's the world we live in. I know what year it is. It's 2012, I get that. But the Steelers, I throw that out. The Steelers are living in the same world that they were in '68, but they operate a certain way, and they've been pretty successful.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everyone.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports