

September 25, 2012



An Interview With:

KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Sorry I'm later than I'm normally late. If we want to officially start these at 12:35, that's probably a better way to do it. I apologize on that one.

Real quickly, medically, Damon Bullock's making progress. We're hoping to get him back. We'll see how that goes this week. Can't give you an answer on that right now. Captains remain the same guys, Micah and James on defense and the two Jameses on offense.

Certainly coming off of a tough loss. It was disappointing. We looked at it on Sunday. Did some corrections, went to work, and we're back moving forward now. Back to work. We play very good Minnesota team. They're coming in here with a lot of momentum obviously. Got off to a great start. They're 4-0. And they're playing very well in all phases offensively, defensively, special teams. Their record certainly is no fluke. So they're playing well in all areas, doing a great job, and we've got a big challenge on our hands and happy to be there certainly.

With that, I'll open it up for questions.

Q. After the game on Saturday, you addressed the onside kick team, how do you determine who's going to be a blocker and who's going to be a receiver?

COACH FERENTZ: Basically, you're looking for, typically, linebackers, tight ends, more tight ends, obviously, if you have enough of them. Guys with ball skills that also can block. Typically on the back line, you've got guys with more receiver skills. We've used guys like Chad Greenway way in the past. He's a linebacker. He's an exception to that rule. Probably could have been an all-conference tight end too. So he fits that role.

Cooper is up there. He's basically a blocker. But that's the thought process that goes into it.

Q. So when you decide who's a blocker and who's a receiver, are the blockers told not to touch the ball

COACH FERENTZ: There's some gray area in it, how you do it in terms of how you line up. Needless to say, that's something we're looking at hard right now.

Q. You had seven guys on the line and then three about 20 yards off the ball. Is that the optimal alignment? Were the first seven just strictly to block and the last back three to receive it?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, and then the obviously question is do you want to bring up your deeper turn guy? That's a choice you have to make. I think there's a split jury on that one, to balance the numbers out. That would be the optimal. Then you've got to worry about them pooching it down there and beating you to it because they're running for it with momentum, and your guys have to turn and run.

So it's a little bit of a mathematical equation.

Q. Personal fouls seem really uncharacteristic of this team, was the mental block going on with this team or was there something else on their mind?

COACH FERENTZ: It would be news to me. Ironically, we've been pretty good, I think, in penalties for the most part, although we've had years where we've been in the middle of the pack or even under the midway part. I said this year, I don't know if it's critical. Sometimes you can be too high in the penalty rankings. In my opinion, that's not always a good thing.

But clearly Saturday, it was a big part of

the ball game. The ones that you can control after the whistle stuff, those types of things, that's the stuff that will get you beat. It factored in. It wasn't the whole game yesterday, but it factored in, to say the least.

Q. You mentioned on the teleconference -- I'm paraphrasing a little bit now -- something about the team not being as prepared as you had hoped?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, the question was about Vandenberg, how is he performing? And I said, not well enough to win four games, and you could say the same about our coaching. We're 2-2 right now. So real simply, if we had scored 33 the other day, we win. If we had held Iowa State to 5, we'd win that game too. That's the bottom line.

Q. Special teams nationally, the national standard is no dedicated special teams coach. Is that just standard operating procedure for coaching staffs to kind of have a guy who's a half position, half special teams?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if there's a standard operating rule, but Scott O'Brien, for instance, probably in the late '80s at Pitt, pretty much that's what he did. Then he also helped out with the linebackers. There are some teams that go that route, but I'd say it's in the minority. It's pretty rare to see that.

It's a possibility of something you could do.

Q. You alluded to earlier the performance of the coaching staff. You've changed out so many guys, are you happy with where the staff is?

COACH FERENTZ: If you're asking me if I'm happy with our staff? Is that what you mean? Yeah, I'm happy with our staff, but I'm not happy that we're 2-2. Nobody is. We all have ownership.

Q. What do you do if Garmon and/or Bullock return to the lineup?

COACH FERENTZ: It means we have two good running backs really. And we expect to have Garmon back. But Garmon's had, I don't know, how many carries? Probably a handful. I'm guessing. I don't know. The reality is still that Damon's played two games and a quarter, something like that. Mark Weisman has played about a game and three-quarters.

The good news is in August we weren't sure what we had, and right now I think we have two guys that are really good prospects at that position. That's encouraging. We think Garmon is going to be okay too, but he hasn't done it yet. But Lester Erb would say we're probably going to need at least three guys. So we'll keep moving him along.

Q. Is Malloy in the mix?

COACH FERENTZ: It depends on the other guys. If we don't have to use him, we won't. He hasn't played a snap. They had him in, but he hasn't played a snap yet. If we can keep him out, we will probably. Probably. We haven't made that decision. We'll probably think more about that next week.

Q. You used more true freshmen the other day. Are you done? Is it still open?

COACH FERENTZ: It depends what happens this season. We're trying to win.

Q. Will Mark Weisman ever move back to fullback this season?

COACH FERENTZ: It depends what happens. I kind of like what I'm seeing on the back end too. He's doing a nice job. We're confident he could play fullback pretty well, certainly.

Q. Will Canzeri play?

COACH FERENTZ: It looks a lot more probable now than it did, say, three weeks ago to me. He's making good progress in practice. I wouldn't say he's 100 percent, but he's a lot closer than I would have anticipated. That's an example of some guys heal faster than others.

That's a real positive, and he would like to play. I will say that. He's going on record saying he'd like to play. We'll see how it goes. But he's getting close.

Q. Is this a better Minnesota team than the last two?

COACH FERENTZ: Absolutely. They're 4-0, first of all. I think I read somewhere it's the first time they've done it since '08 that they started this fast. All you have to do is just watch them play on film. They're playing well. They're playing with confidence. They're playing fast. Part of that is second year in the system. They've done a great job up there. The coaching staff's done a great

job. Most importantly, the players are really playing well.

Q. What about his team, Jerry Kill, stands out? Is there anything they do that's kind of the trademark?

COACH FERENTZ: They win. I think if you go all the way back, it really caught my attention at Southern Illinois. Certainly, he went up to Northern Illinois and continued that. And they're doing the same thing right now.

He's got a staff that's been with him for a long time. They do a great job at it. It just shows in the play. Ultimately, you get evaluated on how the team plays. To me that's what it's all about and what they look like on film. They're very impressive in all three areas -- offensively, defensively, and special teams.

I would just add in there, you lose your marquee player and your quarterback, and it doesn't slow them down at all. They go on to win the Western game and come back last week and win a big game as well. So when you can play through things that would be challenging to anybody, that's really -- that's an impressive thing, and it says a lot about their players and their staff.

Q. Is it getting harder to recruit out of there now?

COACH FERENTZ: It's never been easy for us to recruit anywhere outside our state, and it's not easy in-state either. It's never been easy anywhere.

Typically, the better a home state team does, the more difficult it becomes.

Q. How does this Minnesota defense differ from the one you saw a year ago?

COACH FERENTZ: I think they're faster, more athletic, and they're just playing faster. They are faster too, I think, just overall. They seem to be built with speed in mind. At all positions, not just several, but all positions. And they're opportunistic. They've done a good job with the turnovers. That's one thing that really stands out to me. They're plus five right now, I believe.

And they come at important times. They have a knack of making the big play at the right time.

Q. Troy Stoudermire has been there forever, in '08 he had a 500 yards kickoff return

against you. What challenges does he present?

COACH FERENTZ: It does seem that way. I think he's 28 or 29 return right now.

He's a really good defensive player and has been. The return part of it is he's just -- he's got a knack. Some guys do that really well, some don't. He had it coming in as a true freshman, as we found out firsthand.

We've done well at times against him, but we haven't done so well at other times. That's certainly one of the things on our list right now. We need to do a good job there because he's a very dangerous, very explosive return guy.

Q. Jordan Cotton made some big plays on Saturday. Are you going to get him more involved in the offense?

COACH FERENTZ: Jordan's done a nice job. Steadily he's been improving. He had a really good August. It was good to see him. He made a nice third down catch two weeks ago and certainly the run after the catch on Saturday was really impressive. I think he's gaining confidence, and that's a positive.

Q. Do you bring players back from concussion now? Has it changed any over the years?

COACH FERENTZ: Ten years ago, they were back fast, but really the protocol was much different. I'm not saying it was negligent, but it was just different. Clearly, I think everybody that follows sports at all, all sports right now, it's just a whole different realm of treatment.

It's like anything. I think the more research you do, the more you find out about a certain injury, then things are handled probably a little bit more prudently. Comparison would be the ACL repair of the '80s compared to now. It's just night and day different and for the better, obviously. In the '80s concussions were take a couple aspirin, Tylenol, whatever it may be. I don't want to endorse a product here. But take some, and when you feel okay, get back in there, one of those deals.

Right now it's a whole different deal, and I think that's probably for the better. Not to get into too much commentary, but all the issue being made about former players and all that, I would -- I think it's like anything. If you have an injury and

you don't -- or an illness, if you don't recuperate in the proper way, you run the risk of having further problems. I think that's the emphasis here, and I'm totally comfortable with what we're doing.

Q. What is that?

COACH FERENTZ: I can't give you all the steps, but it's a series of steps. I think, if you talk to -- you can probably look it up on -- what is that, WebMD.com or whatever it is. There's protocol all the players have to clear through. It's a step by step thing. If they go backwards on any of the steps, which happens, then they kind of -- it's like monopoly where you've got to move back three spots and start over again, one of those deals.

I think it's a good system, good process. We just have to live with that.

Q. Are the concussions more prevalent than people might realize, just in the course of a four-month season, practice, games.

COACH FERENTZ: They've always been part of football, as far as I can remember. I've spent one night in a hospital my entire life, knock on wood, and it was for that. Many of you would suggest I probably haven't recovered fully.

So anyway, it's just part of football. If you just stop and don't think about watching a game but just watch what's going on there, just watch the activity, there's really not that much about football that makes sense. If you think about what's going on out there.

Most players that play would all do it over again. Most of us would. It's just not built for the human body.

Q. When you say do it over again, you mean not do it?

COACH FERENTZ: Play again. Most of us would go back and do it again. Most of us have aches and pains that are consequential from playing, but it's just one of those things.

Q. James' number, James Vandenberg, his numbers are down. Is it just -- I don't know how you're measuring, but is it just the change? Is it just the offensive coordinator changing? Is it just the passing game concepts? I know it's a whole team thing, but for him personally.

COACH FERENTZ: First two games we had a hard time scoring touchdowns. I think that's well-documented. To just look at the quarterback,

which I understand is what everybody does on offensive analysis, it's not quite as simple as that.

I'll just say this. I'm glad he's our quarterback, and I'm glad he's going to be our quarterback the next eight games. I think he's a heck of a player, and I think he's a heck of a young man.

Q. What's he doing differently, before he gets the snap, now than he did last year, if anything?

COACH FERENTZ: It's a different language that he's thinking. I mean, he's thinking like all of us are thinking. So it's a whole different language he's thinking. Some of the plays are very different, and some aren't. But I think we're all beyond that.

Again, it's a lot bigger than one position typically. But I could suggest too we've done some things pretty well the last couple of weeks offensively. I've seen improvement. Not total improvement, obviously not enough improvement, but I think we've seen improvement. I think our whole thing right now is consistency in all areas. That's what I would suggest.

At his position, every position really.

Q. Is he going to the line of scrimmage with more play options than he did last year?

COACH FERENTZ: These are questions that are hard to answer. We've always pretty much -- they're not that hard to answer, I guess. They're different options, but it's -- I think he goes into the game pretty well-rehearsed, pretty confident. We try to avoid bad plays if we can, and then if we have a chance to get into a good one, we do that too, and we've tried to do that now for 13-plus years.

Q. Do you think the success that Mark has had over the last two weeks, how much of that is the improvement of the offensive line and what they're able to do up front for him?

COACH FERENTZ: It's obviously a factor, but to have a good running game, it takes good interior blocking, it takes a good back. Also takes good blocking on the perimeter. Typically, if you get long runs, it means the guys outside are blocking a little bit better. Back to our only touchdown the first two games. Kevonte came in and got a big block on the safety, which allowed Damon to slide outside. That's the difference

between a ten-yard gain and a touchdown.

Typically, when you see big plays, really good downfield runs, it means somebody on the outside did a good job too, but obviously the guys inside have to do their work.

Q. You had two guys who were established, or at least had played a lot at that position at fullback going into this year, Brad Rogers and Jonathan Gimm. What was it about Mark that made you want to take that -- in some cases, a risk to try to elevate past two established players.

COACH FERENTZ: It's not a risk. We do this with all players. The guys are doing the best on the practice field are the guys that get the playing time.

Mark, as I said earlier, came on our radar in the spring. We knew he was here last fall, nice young guy and all that stuff, but it wasn't like we were watching him real closely. So in the spring we learned a lot about him.

I mentioned Louis Trinca-Pasat kind of being the guy that emerged in the spring. I think Mark was the guy that continued to do that in August. All of a sudden, boom, he was up there, and factor in there that Brad missed some time with some injuries. So it opened the door. And a lot of times, when the door opens, guys take advantage of it. That's what Mark's done.

Just randomly two weeks ago, we decided to work him a little bit in the backfield, back carrying the football, again, having no idea what was going to happen. That's just kind of luck there, I guess, good timing, whatever you want to call it. The most important thing is that Mark's taken this opportunity and done something with it. That's what you're hoping to see.

Q. Before Mike Meyer's 46-yarder, there was indecision about whether to go for it, it was fourth and six into the wind, and then the field goal. It seemed very uncharacteristic for you guys because you guys usually make that decision and go.

COACH FERENTZ: What had happened on that, quite frankly, going into the game, our thought process was the 22 on that left side, left side from our bench. And that was kind of where we were at, and I told Greg, hey, we're going four downs here. The ball was on the 25, I think, right?

Then we had a delay. We had an injury. And I got to thinking about it, and I don't know, it

wasn't an official test, but it just didn't feel like it was as breezy as it had been earlier in the game. So what the hell. Let's go for it and see what happens. That's the science behind it. Perfect world, we wouldn't have burned a time-out there.

Q. Also, there was a time-out on defense, and you came out with 12 guys. I know you were listening in the headphones on that one.

COACH FERENTZ: It can happen. I saw it happen on Sunday night. I don't know, I saw it in a pro game, going by the video room. It happens. There's a little bit more to that than you might think too.

Q. Looks like you're beginning to get something out of the kick return team but almost nothing out of punt returns. What's happening there?

COACH FERENTZ: I can give you a commentary on that one too, but it's -- I think college has a bad rule in punting, the fact that everybody is allowed downfield when the ball is snapped, I think that's a terrible rule for college football, but that's the rule.

I think with that rule being in place, I don't know how many great returns you'll see. I'm not saying you won't, but I think it's affected things a little bit. That's just my thought on it.

Q. In the NFL, linemen stay on the line?

COACH FERENTZ: You have to be eligible to go down the field, to be more sporting, if you will, but that's just one person's opinion.

Q. Micah looks like he's -- I don't know if indecisive is the right word, he looks like more often than not he tends to run sideways.

COACH FERENTZ: There's usually someone coming free in his face. If you look at his best returns, he's made one guy miss and gets it up the field. Because of the way it is, it's just -- it's a tougher play. It's a tougher play. Realistically to me, the most important thing is ball security. If you field the ball, don't let it role.

And that's an issue too with some of the rugby punting. That's why a lot of people do it. Again, there's a lot to it, but I'd be all for big returns. They're tough to come by. I don't know what the national average is, but they're tough to come by.

Q. With the rugby kicks, sometimes it takes just a half second to a second longer before the punt is actually takes place that allows the linemen to get downfield more often. Is that part of what your issue is, I think?

COACH FERENTZ: Kind of a nickel summary of it. Most people put three big guys back there to help protect, and they've got a bunch of little guys, ball snapped. Everybody runs left, runs right, and goes. That's the way it is. That's the way it is. But it affects things, yeah. It affects things. And you don't need a great punter to do that.

Everybody can do it. If I felt that strongly about it, maybe I should rugby punt. Maybe we're giving up something.

Q. Keenan makes remarkable catches. Catches behind him. How has he progressed this year? Has he become the leader that you expect now in that position?

COACH FERENTZ: I think the last two weeks he's really done a lot of good things. I mentioned Jordan earlier. Kevonte got into the mix two weeks ago and is in it now. Keenan made a beautiful play on the first play of the game the other day and made a couple of big catches two weeks ago. We had a couple of touch and goes the other day. We had a third noncatch, had a shot at it. It was a bang-bang play, I guess. I think he's doing a lot of good things, and it's really good to see.

I said earlier in August, if our veteran guys aren't playing good, we're going to have a hard time. I think he's doing a nice job out there catching that football.

Q. Are you going to have the same personnel on onside kick coverage this week as last week?

COACH FERENTZ: We haven't had a long discussion on it yet this week, but I guess we are.

Q. What's it like the last three years against Minnesota and in this past game to give up an onside kick?

COACH FERENTZ: What would you guess? We haven't celebrated, if that's what you're asking.

Q. How are they different with Shortell at quarterback?

COACH FERENTZ: One guy's a really strong runner, I mean really strong runner, and the other guy's more of a thrower. But they've had success with both. That's all I know. It's impressive what all of them have done but certainly -- and Shortell came in against USC a year ago and did a great job. A little bit like Vandenberg showing up at Ohio State two years ago. I think it's a good parallel.

It's a real credit to him. Certainly a credit to him.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everyone.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports