

August 6, 2012



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Certainly welcome to everybody. It's good to get started. It's a little different for us, the routine. Have been on the field for four days already, so maybe a little bit more knowledgeable about our players than in years past certainly. It's a nice change certainly. Still trying to figure out basketball. They have the opportunity, the coaches can go out on the court with their players during the summertime and we haven't caught up in football yet. I tease Fran McCaffery I think they have better lobbyists, the basketball coaches do. At least we've had a chance now to see our guys on the field and get a feel for things, and also a little bit different, too, in that we finally got into the indoor facility. We had our first practice there Saturday, just a tremendous facility, and the players were certainly curious, being out there on the grass field on Friday, having a chance to look at it, peek in the doors. We finally got to be inside it on Saturday, and it was just a tremendous experience. It's a great facility, and we are very excited about that, very appreciative, and also very excited about the second phase of the project coming down the road.

Those are a couple things going on. Just to bring you up to date on a couple roster announcements, if you will: Dakota Getz unfortunately is going to have to take a medical redshirt. He's tried to come back from a pretty serious knee injury and worked extremely hard, basically since January and the thing just was not responding the way any of us had hoped. So he is going to finish his career on the field and just be a student for right now. Our first concern obviously is him graduating, and he may come back and help in the program in some phase down the road, but I

think he just wanted a little time. So we're sorry to report that bit of news.

And then the other bit of housekeeping, Collin Sleeper is going to serve a multi-game suspension entering into the season, and this is just for violations of things in the past. Those are two announcements I will make.

Certainly in past years we've had a lot of great moments out on the field, and we're awfully excited about this football team, too. I think this team has a great opportunity. We have a long road ahead of us right now, but we have a great opportunity to have a good season. It's a young team. This is a team that's really worked hard since January, and they continue to do so.

I think they've had a good attitude, good work ethic, and as we move forward the keys for this football team I think are going to be improvement, and that's true with any team, any organization, but certainly our football team right now, and also developing consistency, and those things are a lot easier to talk about than do, and that's where we're at right now. We're in a very, very important phase of this team's development.

The good news is I think we have a lot of healthy competition at a lot of different spots. That's certainly a positive. We had a depth chart that's been distributed. It really is something you'll probably be able to throw out the window in a week or two because I think this is the kind of football team that's going to look different in the weeks ahead and that certainly may go through September and even into October.

Obviously what we're doing on the field right now is very, very important.

Then the last thing I'll just close with, needless to say I've kind of hinted at it, this is a big month for us. We'll have a chance now this week and next to be pretty much secluded with the team, just concentrate on football, and they've been great so far. It's going to get a little tougher as we go along I imagine, and then school opens up that

third week, so that will be a little different challenge for the team, too, to keep their focus where it needs to be. August is going to be a big month for our team, and as you move forward September is no different. I think as you watch our team, you'll probably see a change right in front of your eyes.

The work that we do in the next two months is really going to have a lot to do I think with how the season turns out, and with that being said I'll open it up for questions.

Q. What decision did you make last week regarding De'Andre Johnson?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, obviously it was his second charge. After the one charge it wasn't alarming -- I didn't have the facts when I was notified in Chicago on Friday, and then there was another charge after that. Nothing has been decided in either case. But it's like every player. Every player has a chart that's either -- they're adding to it or taking away from it, and I just made the decision I think that was best for all parties.

Q. How comfortable are you with what you have in place at running back?

COACH FERENTZ: We're going to coach the guys on the field. We've always done that regardless if it's an injury, discipline issue, anything like that. And we've got guys out there that are capable. I'm not sure how it's going to play out yet. It's going to be decided here in the next couple months, and we'll just see how it goes. But the guys are working hard right now. They look capable out there, and we have a lot of work to do. It's representative of our football team. But we certainly have enough talent out there, and hopefully we can bridge the experience gap, as well.

Q. Can you be specific about the number of games for Collin Sleeper's suspension?

COACH FERENTZ: That would indicate at least two, and then we'll go from there. We'll decide that as we go along here a little further.

Q. You talked about this moving-target depth chart. I'm sure a few skills positions, that doesn't involve those, but can you give me a year or two in your coaching career where you've had a depth chart that is so fluid this time of year?

COACH FERENTZ: All I can say is this is our youngest team. I think that's documented if

you look at the number of seniors and projected senior starters, which that's still up in the air. But even if we hit the high number there it's going to be one of the younger teams we've had. But, hey, that's college football. The guys that are on the team, you look at guys like Christian Kirksey, like James Morris, two guys on defense, Tanner Miller, they've played a lot of football. Dom Alvis played well last well last year offensively, guys like Kevonte Martin-Manley, guys that aren't seniors that we think are capable of playing really well.

And we've got a lot of guys that have been in the program. I think when they get the opportunity, they'll do a fine job. I'll go back to our offensive line after the 2009 season, that was a big concern. I thought those guys played really well during the 2010 season, and most of those guys were first-year starters at that time. That's part of the fun of football.

Q. What does, fill in the blank, have to do to show you that he can start at tailback against Northern Illinois?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we have guys that are capable, and right now we just have to piece that together. We only have had four practices so far. Everybody looks pretty good right now, but you'd expect that. Over the course of time usually the picture becomes a little bit more clear, and then the other obvious part of it, and the most important part of it, is how players perform in games. And that's something you just can't simulate in practice. It's a different arena certainly, so the first hurdle is going to be what do we get done in camp, and who looks the best. We'll try to get that lined up correctly and see how they respond once we go to Chicago and that'll be the next phase.

That's where I say I think things could change in the matter of weeks of September. You go back to 2008, Ricky Stanzi and Pat Angerer, two guys both went in second team and ended up winning their jobs during the course of September and then obviously went on and had good careers. They're still doing a good nice job.

Q. Does catching the ball play a big part of that?

COACH FERENTZ: That's part of the equation, but if a guy is just a dominant runner and a little short on that we can bend and weave on that.



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Q. How is your offense adapting to your new offensive coordinator?

COACH FERENTZ: I just saw Norm Parker in the locker room and he made the comment -- he's been out there a couple times, not every practice, but he was impressed with the ball not being on the ground and guys being in line with the cadence, knowing what to do for the most part. The younger guys are struggling, certainly the new players -- but I thought that was one of the most impressive things, and I think with the change there's a heightened awareness, A. We're inexperienced, and B with the change, everybody's got to be a little bit more in tune. It's not the same old thing on two. I think the guys have really learned well so far, but again, we're early into the mix, and by the end of the week I'm not so sure we'll be quite as happy about that.

Q. Same thing with your new defensive coordinator?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, defensively it's not quite the same challenge. There aren't as many -- first of all, the nomenclature and all the wording is the same, it hasn't changed dramatically. It's not quite as big a transition, but I think everybody knows we have a young team right now and the attentiveness has been very good.

Q. Since spring practice how has the defensive line come together up to this point?

COACH FERENTZ: I think they've really progressed well in the spring, and certainly that's going to be an area of interest. We have a couple positions that are pretty obvious. I think the running back situation, the receiver position. But after four days, two of them only with pads, today was our second day in pads, so a little easier to evaluate those guys with pads on. I think they're young, eager, they're working hard, they're capable, but we're hardly there yet. But I thought they really progressed in the spring. That was minus Dom Alvis and Carl Davis. We have those two guys back out with us now, and hopefully two weeks from now they'll be a lot further along. I think they will be. There's no reason why they shouldn't be.

Q. What's your quick assessment of the freshman class?

COACH FERENTZ: So far, so good. After four practices, I made that comment -- you're always a little cautious to say too much about

anybody on the first blush, but they run around, they look like they all belong on the field in their given spots for the most part. They're working hard at it, and we're giving them a lot of opportunity. And that's part of the theme, too. Everything is open right now. Everybody on the team has an opportunity, and if they can show us they can - contribute be it on special teams, be it as a backup or if they can earn starting jobs, too - we're open to anything. We've got to get our best 22 players lined up and we'll go from there.

Q. How have the players responded to Greg Davis?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's been great. Greg is a veteran coach. It's not the same as, but to me it's similar to a guy like Norm Parker or Bill Brashier that I worked with back in the '80s who's a proven veteran coach that has really has great expertise, but also has a great teaching ability, I think. He's been excellent with the staff, excellent with the players, and I think the players have taken to his style, his approach and done a great job. So that's what we're hoping for. It's been excellent.

Q. Do you think he's freshened things up a little bit?

COACH FERENTZ: Any time you're 13 years into something you need to look at everything. We said that back in the off season. We're going to need to do that regardless, in all phases of our program, and I think certainly having three coaching changes made that a necessity.

We've met in a lot of different areas, had a lot of different discussions, and just are really pleased with a lot of things that we've talked about. We'll throw them up against the wall and see if they continue to stick. But so far, so good.

Q. Brad Rodgers is a running back in the latest depth chart, but he's also a fullback. How much is he a running back?

COACH FERENTZ: I think given our situation, two things are in play there. We don't know how much one back will be in, but I think hear him out certainly. So that's one thought process there, and then the other part of it is that just given our circumstances right now, we need to look at everybody. Basically anybody that's in the backfield position, maybe outside of Jonathan Gimm right now, is going to get a look at carrying the football and just see if they can help us out in

some way.

There are a lot of different ways to put this together, and we've tried to figure out a way each and every year. I go back, I mentioned earlier maybe in Chicago that if you look at the '09 season, at the end of the '09 season or the 2010 season we had a true freshman ended up being the MVP I believe in both ballgames. Both of them played pretty well.

And you go back to 2001, our first Bowl game, Aaron Greiving was a redshirt freshman there, I believe, but nonetheless, he got the job done. We'll keep an open mind, give everybody an opportunity. One thing about Brad, he's been in the program. We certainly have a great trust level with him, and I think that he's a fairly versatile guy. He came here as a running back.

We are very open-minded, basically at every position.

Q. Can you characterize who's getting what carries? Is Nate Meier also in this mix?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's working a little bit back there, as well, yeah. If we can do it feasibly we can stay out there probably four hours to give everybody enough work, but the rest of the team wouldn't be able to hold up.

Q. How is John Wienke handling moving to the punt game?

COACH FERENTZ: John is great. He's got a tremendous attitude. He has from day one when he got in here, and I think that's something, he's welcomed the challenge of it. He's really started working in earnest in it last spring, and that's a position that's clearly up for grabs right now. We've got three guys contending for it, and it is one of the key positions we're looking at. And we feel great about having Mike Meyer at the place kicking position. That's a great situation. Casey Kreiter is an excellent deep snapper, but the punting position is a critical area of focus for us right now.

Q. You have two linebackers with a lot of experience. First of all, what's the familiarity with them, and two, do Quinton Alston and Anthony Hitchens have chance to move in there somewhere?

COACH FERENTZ: Quinton really is more of a middle linebacker. For him, if he would be one of the best three, we'd probably move James Morris. I think James is pretty versatile. Anthony Hitchens is one of those guys I was kind of alluding

to earlier. He's been here two years now, a lot more comfortable, a lot more proficient than he was a year ago, and he just looks better out there. That's how it's supposed to go as guys get older. We think he has a chance to be a really good football player. A couple young guys behind him with Cole Fisher and Marcus Collins, and then on the outside Travis Perry is a guy that caught our eye back in the spring, did a really nice job. And Christian Kirksey, it's conceivable he could move, as well.

It's like most positions, we have some guys with good position flexibility, and ultimately we'll try to get our best three out there and have plan A and plan B in case you have to make a move after that.

Q. What are your expectations regarding Brandon Scherff?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, Brandon is another guy, he probably played a little bit more than Hitchens, played last year, had some injury issues, but again, he's been here two years. He's a big, strong, mature guy with a great attitude, good work ethic, and I think we all feel he's probably a little bit more comfortable on the outside. He's playing tackle, played guard more so last year.

So he's still got things to learn certainly, things to clean up and get better at, but I think he's got an opportunity to be a really good football player. I really feel that way about a lot of our young linemen. But it's going to take a little time certainly.

Q. Is there a specific area you're looking for improvement from James Vandenberg coming into his senior year?

COACH FERENTZ: The big theme seems to be road victories, and I would include our whole team in that one, at least when I read the critiques. Nobody is more invested than James, nobody works harder. He certainly can improve in all areas just like every player and every coach in our program. As far as the road thing goes, I've said that before. To me that's more of a team thing. We're going to have to compete better and compete harder to be successful on the road. If you want to have a good season in any conference, that's always going to be a challenge. Especially in this conference, the road venues are tough in our league, great home stadiums, great

traditional places with good crowd involvement, so the degree of difficulty goes up.

And looking back at September, I alluded to that earlier, at least one break we may have hopefully is that we play in Kinnick four straight times. So hopefully our team can harden up a little bit before we have to go into a hostile environment. I don't think Chicago -- it's on the road, but it's not going to be quite like traveling to some of the other places we go. That's going to be a challenge for our football team certainly.

Q. How do you feel about a backup?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, we've got guys competing right now. I think we have a nice group of quarterbacks: Cody Sokol came in here last year and made a good impression; Jake Rudock red shirted last year and works extremely hard; and CJ Beathard just joined us here four days ago and looks like he's got good potential, too. So that position overall they're learning, they're getting a lot of work right now, and really pleased with it.

We feel great about James being our quarterback and our leader, and I feel like we have some good young players coming up and with good healthy competition.

Q. Is there a learning curve for the Drake kid?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah. For anybody I think it's just different. He was able to join us sometime in June, I believe it was the first week. But certainly it's different for him, just the routine, getting to know everybody, but the fact that he was here this summer I think helped him that way. Probably feels a little bit more comfortable just being around everybody. Now it's another phase, though, because we're actually into football. Unlike the rest of the guys on defense other than the true freshmen, he's in a learning mode right now trying to figure out what we're talking about most of the time.

Q. What have you seen of Austin Blythe so far? I know he's elevated this year quite a bit.

COACH FERENTZ: I thought Austin did a real nice job in the spring, and the other true freshman last year, Jordan Walsh, was right behind him. He really did a good job, as well. Austin was probably more consistent throughout the spring, kind of started at a higher plateau and did a nice job, whereas Jordan really climbed it fast, in 15 days. Both those guys are certainly in

contention for starting spots right now. I don't think there's too much that's sealed up up front. Again, I think we have pretty good, healthy competition there. That's a spot that's going to be fun to watch.

Q. Is it safe to say that the freshmen running backs won't be redshirting this season?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll just see how it plays out. I think all of them right now seem to be learning well and are doing some good things, but it's really early right now. We've got a lot more to throw at them, and they haven't been tackled yet, either. But we anticipated some mistakes, we've had some of those. But we've also seen a lot of good things from them, and again, I think that with the test of time, certainly we'll know more. You guys will all get a look at them on Saturday and we'll know more after Saturday, and that will continue for the next couple weeks, and probably at that position again in that case it may go for a little longer than that.

Q. What are your thoughts on the offensive lines right now. You've lost three guys to the NFL or the next level. You're rebuilding but you seem to be pretty confident.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I'm not complaining about losing guys. I remember years ago when I was in the NFL, a college coach kind of bellyaching a little bit about guys that were going to the first -- he was losing in the first round, and it's kind of hard to have sympathy. When a guy leaves early for a first round draft pick, how can you make a bad choice? That I think is just a good thing.

It's rare. It doesn't happen very often. We've had three straight guys, I guess. So that's pretty unusual. But it's a credit to the players. They've worked hard, and if you look at all three of the guys we're talking about, they're extraordinary football players. It's a good thing.

Q. Are you pretty confident that they all can replace, adequately replace, those three starters?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, you have to. That's just part of the deal. The next guy has to be ready to go. It's not like it was a big surprise. I think in Riley Reiff's case we all thought there was that opportunity, that possibility. We knew pretty much in December it could happen. So we've had 10 months to plan for that. Like I said, if that's our

biggest problem over the next decade, I'll be excited about that one. I might even sign on for it right now.

Q. The players coming in, can they get on the field and play?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, they don't have any choice. They've got to be ready. But again, I mean, that's what they've worked for, and probably if you asked them and gave them truth serum, they may say they're glad those guys left. It's less competition for them to work on. They don't think that way.

But nonetheless it's an opportunity, and guys are going to graduate, guys go a year early. To me it's not that big a deal. My only thing on the draft thing is when guys leave to become a middle round or a late rounder, but everybody has got to make their own decisions, too. And in some cases that's better if a player's heart is on the outside, they're better off being there than on the football team. It still gets back to the player, and then somebody has got to be ready to go just as if somebody was injured. Somebody is going to have to step in there and get the job done.

Q. Can you talk about some of the special teams players coming in?

COACH FERENTZ: That's what we're trying to get through right now. We're not overly consistent in the spring at the punting position. Didn't expect that we would be. And that's not unusual, I don't think. And it may be a little bit of a path or a road here moving forward. We can't panic if we shank one or hit one, miss-hit one, that type of thing, because it's probably going to happen. When you're inexperienced things are going to happen, and you've got to work through that. If we miss-hit a punt, we're going to have to play a little better on defense that possession and not worry about it and do something about it. That's part of football.

I just look back a year ago we lost Ryan Donahue, an excellent football player, and we weren't quite sure, and Eric Guthrie, a guy that didn't really look like a prospect a couple years before that, ends up not only punting well, but we lead the Big Ten in net punting, and Eric is still down Tampa Bay. I don't know if he'll make the team or not, but it's a real credit to him, the work ethic and just the dedication that he displayed to get where he got.

I think we have guys working hard right now. Somebody will fill that void, will find a way to

get that done. We'll have to cover a little bit better than we have. We've done that pretty well for a long time. But I'm not going to minimize it. Obviously it's a very important position just like having a placekicker is, also, and we haven't been quite as consistent at that position as we'd like. But if this spring is any indication for what we're lacking at the punting position, Mike Meyer had a tremendous spring. He's going into his third year now as a performer and we really expect him to be playing at a higher level, and hopefully those things balance out a little bit. But that's how a team should work.

Q. Once you get past your first team wide receivers, who are some other guys you expect to make a big impact this year?

COACH FERENTZ: That door is wide open. We have several guys, I mentioned, who was I talking about earlier that made progress in the spring? Jordan Walsh. I can say the same thing about Don Shumpert. Don was kind of lost out there the first couple days, really didn't stand out, and then as the spring went on got a little bit better and then you're hearing feedback during the course of the summer that he was having a good summer, and so far it looks like he's doing a good job.

But again, it's opportunity. The door is wide open right now. Certainly Kevonte had an outstanding spring, and we're counting on him to play really well. Keenan was in and out in the spring. We're expecting him. He's had good production in the Big Ten, and there's no reason why he shouldn't have a great year as a senior.

So now we have to supplement that, and the door is wide open both to the guys on the roster right now, guys like Shumpert, Staggs, Cotton, players like that, but also younger guys that just came in. We've got four guys working at receiver in the freshman class, and so far, so good with those guys.

And the running back position, I think that's a position where freshmen can play. I think realistically they can go out there and if not start, at least contribute if we're smart about how we approach it with them and try to put them in situations where they can have some success, maybe not have to know 100 percent of what we're doing but maybe if we can pare it down to 75 percent, something like that, so they've got a little less on their plate mentally.

Q. We saw a light go on for C.J. Fiedorwicz at the end of last season. How has he progressed this summer?

COACH FERENTZ: Again, we don't get much exposure in the summer. I'm not a basketball coach. But I think he knows where he's at right now in terms of his career. I read the articles that come out, try to read as much as I can. And I think self-admission, he said he could have worked harder in the last couple years, and that realization came to him, and that made him a better football player, and I think we've seen that.

He had a really good spring. I mentioned Kevonte a minute ago. CJ was out there all spring, did a really good job. And then right along with him, Zach Derby had his best football, 15 days of football, in our program.

I think both those guys are certainly climbing the ladder. Zach has done a really nice job throughout his career. CJ has a chance to be a really good football player, and I think he's intent on that, and so far he's been practicing well. Certainly you lose a guy like Marv McNutt, somebody has got to pick up some of that slack, and it can't always just be one person, but tight end is a big part of that equation for sure.

Q. Who's in contention for kickoff returner?

COACH FERENTZ: A lot of guys. The kickoff returner will move down the way, but that may be a freshman, too, you just never know. But basically anybody that wants to do it and shows that they can do it is going to get an opportunity. That's kind of been a hit-or-miss thing for us in recent years.

Q. With that freshman thing in mind, how many preferred walk-ons do you usually take?

COACH FERENTZ: Boy, I don't know, probably a handful I'm guessing, something like that. We're allowed 105 players here right now. That's what we have on campus. Our roster will probably end up around 115, so we've still got a couple, handful of guys that are going to join us here when school starts.

Q. Just playing true freshmen. You played 10 last year and I think eight or nine the year before.

COACH FERENTZ: I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. I thought you said losing.



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I think it's realistic, and I think, again, with our football team built the way it is, I don't know if that number will be 10. But we have a lot of positions open for grabs right now. Typically I think it's going to be the case this year, it's a little harder for guys on the interior lines, both lines, to be involved. But I think if you look around the perimeter, the running back, wide receiver, defensive back positions, I think absolutely, I think we have -- based on four days, I think that's a possibility, and our punter could be a true freshman. I'm not trying to drop any hints or foreshadow, but it's a three-man race right now, and he's got equal claim to it as anybody else. We're wide open to whoever can go.

Q. How thin is that margin between the 9-10 win season you had a few years ago and the 7-win season you had last year?

COACH FERENTZ: It's always been 10. That's one thing I would say, maybe with one exception. I really think since 2001 going into the year we've had a chance to put a good football team on the field, and hopefully be in competition when November comes around. Certainly the way you compete now is a little different having divisional play. But that's been the goal, and it's typically a really fine line. There are a lot of things that go into it. The challenge is to try to control the things you can control and then deal with the things that you can't control as well as you can, probably better than your opponent.

It's like doing a puzzle every year. There's a lot of work that goes into it, and nobody can really -- as hard as you try, you can't predict what's going to happen. But all that being said, I'm standing up here today not giving any excuses why we can't be successful or why we can't be a competitive football team. That's our goal certainly.

I say that all of us fully realize how much work we have to do. We have a lot of things that have to improve and a lot of things we're going to have to get better at. But just looking at what I know, I think there's every reason to think that we have a good football team.

But that's the hard work that goes into it right now, and we'll -- we got it started, now we've got a lot more to go.

Q. New coordinators and the youth that you talked about, would you use the word

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rebuild or do you just lower your expectations?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not a big one on expectations. Like I said, outside of the first two years, my expectations have been the same every year. We're going to try to make the most out of the opportunities in front of us daily and weekly, and with the season they all add up. That determines how a season goes.

We feel like we have a chance right now. You know, if you do something for 13 years there's a good chance something is going to change. And based on the national average I think we certainly outlived what the norms are, no pun intended. So that's part of it.

And I look at it as an opportunity. That's really how I looked at it. You hate to lose good people just like you hate to lose a guy like Riley Reiff or Bryan Bulaga to an NFL team. But that's where opportunity comes or when retirement comes, that's part of life. But it gave us an opportunity to bring some really good people in, and I think that's what we've done, just like when players graduate we have an opportunity to go out and recruit some other outstanding young guys and hopefully some good stories, and that's the fun of all this stuff.

It's been enjoyable. It's been a different off-season certainly, and it's been enjoyable, and now we're doing what we really like to do.

Q. On that note could you talk about the relationship between Coach Davis and Vandenberg.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, James is no dummy. You probably are privy to his academic prowess. It's pretty good. He's a very impressive student, and he carries that into the common sense world. He was paying attention pretty closely to what was going on when we were searching, giving some thought to things, and then when Greg got here, nobody was closer to Greg right from the start than James.

This is James's senior year. I don't want to overstate it for him or speak for him, but he obviously wants to play his best football this year, like you'd hope. So part of that equation certainly is for him to get with Greg, get the jump on things, and I'd venture to say he's a couple steps ahead of all of us offensively as far as knowing what Greg is looking for, what he's going to do, how he operates, that type of thing. And flipping it over on Greg's side, how do you not love James Vandenberg? James is just an outstanding guy. I think it's been a pretty good marriage certainly

already, and he's doing all he can to be on top of things.

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