

November 4, 2014



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: We've got a big challenge on the road this week. So we'll get started on that this afternoon.

Medically, I think both Canzeri and Kidd will have a chance. We'll have to see how they do in practice. They'll both be out there today and hopefully they can move around. They're a little bit better than they were last week.

We're getting ready for Minnesota. They're a very good football team with a 6-2 record. And I think the big thing is they're a veteran football team, all three phases.

And then beyond that, a veteran staff. They've got a group that's been together for quite some time, when Coach Kill came up there basically the whole staff came intact. So they have a system they've believed in for quite some time. It's been successful everywhere they've gone.

And I think it's very clear that the team has embraced the things that they deem to be very, very important, and they're executing them really well.

So just a really good football team, a veteran football team, as I mentioned. One thing that jumps out about them is their special teams are really good. It's the biggest challenge we'll have this year, at least we've had at this point.

They have excellent specialists and beyond that, all their guys work really hard. They have a good scheme there, like they do offensively and defensively. And they play with a great effort and they have a good core of special teams guys. Everywhere you turn it's going to be a big challenge and we'll get started on this this afternoon.

Q. Were you surprised at how well Wadley played on Saturday, or had you seen things in practice that maybe indicated maybe he had a chance?

COACH FERENTZ: Scout team player of the week. I don't usually publicize that. But he was scout team player of the week for us last week. He's done some good things. You never know until a guy gets out there.

And the jury is hardly out right now. He's played one game. He's got a long ways to go right now. But he's a guy that likes football, has a good attitude, enjoys practice and his teammates, and those things are all very positive.

Q. How do you get him into the rotation without also maybe overexposing him too much too fast?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if there's an answer for that. We'll just try to play it by ear and use him as smartly as we can, and just kind of go from there.

Q. Is he No. 6 on the depth chart?

COACH FERENTZ: I wasn't counting. We had four guys coming in with experience that we felt pretty good about. And it's just how seasons go. Guys get injured, unfortunately, and there are twists and turns.

Both he and Jonathan have practiced well. They're both smaller guys, obviously, compared to the other four. But circumstance opened up for him. He jumped in, and did a good job.

Q. Is it fair to say that you didn't expect Tommy Gaul to be such a part of the offense at this point in the season?

COACH FERENTZ: You never know how things are going to go. I've said repeatedly that for us to have a good season we have to have some good stories. And Tommy is unfolding as one of the better stories we've had. And Tommy's always

done a good job. He's done it in a very -- almost a quiet fashion, if you will.

He's a quality guy. Solid in every regard. And then the big thing is when he got to the moment of truth he got his chance against Indiana, and he did a heck of a job. His preparation really showed up on film and he's done a nice job ever since he's played there.

In some ways I think it steadied us a bit and it's been really good.

Q. Austin said other than what hand he puts on the ground, there's not really much difference in the position. Is he underplaying what he's done to play three positions?

COACH FERENTZ: Some guys do it really well. Some guys have good position flexibility. I think in his case he's played a lot of football here.

And I guess to answer your question, probably my answer would be no, only because when he jumped in at center last year, he looked like he had been doing that for 10 years, which he hadn't. He kind of moves around without any problem. Doesn't seem to really affect him a great deal.

Q. The offensive line, did they grade out pretty well? Do you think it was the best game for the offensive line this season against Northwestern?

COACH FERENTZ: They played well. They were a little bit more detailed. It was just one of those days where things clicked a little bit and it was good to see.

Q. You look at the stats of Minnesota, known as a running team. Dead last in the Big Ten in passing. What's the challenge of facing a team that you know that's what they specialize in, the ground attack? It's easy to say they're one dimensional, but what's the challenges of preparing?

COACH FERENTZ: You can't load up. If you did they're going to throw the ball down the field on you. They do a good job that way. Well-conceived offense. Fits their players.

They're a good football team. They look like they have in the last couple of years. The biggest differences they're more veteran, a lot more experienced, older, physical guys, and they run the ball with great success. And their running back has done a tremendous job. Their quarterback is a really good runner and can hurt

you with his arm, as well. It's a little bit of a different challenge.

Seems like every week you've got a little something different and this one certainly is a different one in itself.

Q. You said that Jake Rudock probably had his best game this season. How much credit goes to the offensive line and the way they played in that game?

COACH FERENTZ: We're coming off a game where we were really hit and miss in a lot of different areas. We got in situations where you're second and really long or third and long and those aren't good situations. So at least we're able to stay ahead of the chains a little bit Saturday. And for the most part our pass protection was really solid. Good to see. Receivers did a good job. One of those things where everything was clicking. And Jake certainly looked like he had command out there, which is good, and threw the ball well.

Q. Kick return, is it Jonathan Parker making plays or is it the unit?

COACH FERENTZ: It's both. I think Chris (White) has been really pleased with the guys the way they're working at it. Especially the guys up front. That's one of the harder jobs in football is to block that front line on kick return.

So those guys have been working at it all season long going back to camp. And even in the spring. And if we're doing a good job up there and the guys in the back are doing a pretty good job, then you've got a guy who can return the ball, it all kind of goes together. But you almost need all of that to have some success.

Q. In that group you have a good mix of rookies and vets?

COACH FERENTZ: We have guys who can move around and run. And tip of the hat to Jake Duzey. He jumped in there for George Kittle Saturday and did a really good job and that's a tough job being the center in there.

Q. Going back to the line, yesterday Brandon was named the semifinalist for the Lombardi Award. Can you touch a bit on that award and what it means?

COACH FERENTZ: This is the season where they're paring things down a little bit. We had a lot of pro folks through already, which you do

every year, and we'll have plenty more coming.

But the list kind of starts with Brandon. He's just a tremendous football player. And I think the fact that he came back for a fifth year tells you a lot about how he's built and how he's wired. I think maybe even more so what he went through after the Ball State game to have a really challenging week health-wise and show up and not only play but play very well the following Saturday.

There just aren't a lot of guys that are playing that do that, and on top of that he's a really good football player. So I've got to think, I don't know, those are all very subjective awards, when it comes to grading linemen.

But with all due respect, there are a lot of good players out there but he's right there at the front of the class of the great ones we've had, and we've had some guys in recent years do pretty well.

Going back to Gallery winning the Outland. And a couple guys in the NFC Central are starting at tackle. Marshal Yanda -- I just read something where he got voted best lineman in the league. I don't know what poll it was -- might have been his mom's poll. I don't know. But we've had some guys that have played really well. And Brandon has a lot of the best of all those guys. It's really nice to have him on our football team and we're enjoying that.

Q. There have been a couple of incidents like the Maryland players not shaking hands with Penn State players or the Michigan State player driving the stake down. How much do you concern yourself with your team's behavior leading up to kickoff? Are you in total control, do you think?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm never in total control. You've seen us play, right. I wasn't involved or at either of those two venues. And football is a really emotional game.

And historically, not just in our conference, but all conferences, you see things, emotions get a little bit run away and all that. And so I guess I'm just saying anything can happen at any time, really. It's hard if you're dealing with competitive people.

Things can happen at any time. And the accounts I've read on both of those, both sides, both people involved regretted it afterwards. And it just happens I guess sometimes.

Q. What was your focus, your mission, your directive, to get the offense the way you wanted it after the Maryland game?

COACH FERENTZ: The biggest thing was -- I know you guys get tired of hearing me say it -- but I keep going back to execution. But to me it was as simple as the three things I kept harping on or mentioned vocally, publicly, and behind closed doors, it's just hard to be a good football team if you don't tackle well. If you have a lot of self-inflicted wounds, major penalties, and if you turn the ball over, you do those three things in any conference game, it's not realistic to think you're going to win.

We tackled a little bit better Saturday and that was good to see. We still have some room for improvement there. Our ball security was much better. And again just avoiding those -- I say penalties, negative yards plays offensively. You put yourself under a lot of pressure when you get those things.

And when you got an eraser, a guy who can run down the field or make four guys miss with the ball in his arm, that's a little bit different deal. But we're typically not wired that way.

So for us execution is really important whether it's the run pass, whatever it may be.

Q. When you look at where you're at in standings, do you like the way things are and the ways things are shaping up this month?

COACH FERENTZ: I wish we were undefeated. We set out the season to try to win every game, just like every team in our conference, I'm sure. But we're not. So the reality is we're a 6-2 ball club and we're not looking much further than Saturday, that's about as far as we've got to look right now.

We know we've got a heck of a challenge in front of us. So for us to get to 7-2, it's going to take a really good week of work and good week of preparation and more importantly we'll have to play our best football Saturday.

Q. Can you give us a comment on the outstanding play of Louis Trinca-Pasat last week?

COACH FERENTZ: I just talked about Brandon and Louie is another guy that just -- you have to really be happy for them to get recognized by the conference. That was tremendous.

And he's a guy who was undersized like a

lot of guys we recruit. We thought he had the right attributes mentally and he sure does.

He works extremely hard and has great pride. I don't know if we've got anybody that's more mentally tough than him. And to see him continue to play the way he has played, and really he kind of got his -- he got thrown around pretty good in 2012 like a lot of young guys do. But it's been going the other direction the last two years.

He's just a guy that lines up and competes. And you better bring your lunch bucket if you're going to play with him, because he's that kind of guy. He's one of our strongest team leaders, and just a totally invested guy.

Q. Quiet leader or verbal guy out there?

COACH FERENTZ: Quiet. He's got a quiet personality I guess, but he's an extremely intense person. Really intense and extremely determined. And so when he was getting kicked around in 2012, he didn't quit and kept fighting through it.

And he was close to quitting, I think, the year before, which is part of this story. And fortunately he decided to stick with us. And a lot of athletes go through that because it's hard. It's hard to do something that's challenging. And it's a credit to him. He's a tremendous young guy and he's graduated and all that stuff. Everything about him is great.

Q. You speak of execution. How much of the success on the ground against Northwestern was because of better execution, and do you think was that a tease or do you hope they really made a big step?

COACH FERENTZ: Time will tell. We're a little cleaner with our execution, the blocking and all that stuff. It wasn't perfect but at least it was a step forward.

Both Mark and Akrum ran the ball well, which helps, too, and they were seeing things pretty well. Like we missed too many holes and that type of deal.

Getting Macon back helped us too and John did a great job. And John is probably developmentally where Macon was a year ago. The beauty of experience. That guy is not out there. So it was good to get him back.

Q. Lowdermilk, you talked about him being hard on himself. Does part of his makeup being from a very strong football

family and the game means a lot to him, does that come out when he has a performance like Saturday, when he kind of turns things around?

COACH FERENTZ: I think so. And the rest of the story, his dad was not a combine phenom, but he was a really respected personnel guy.

Kirk Lowdermilk was a really good player because of his mental makeup. And I guess that's what we were banking on getting with John.

The best part about it is John's mom is way tougher than Kirk is. So it's really a good deal, good combination.

Q. Are you impressed with the play from the underclassmen, particularly their performance in the game situation?

COACH FERENTZ: Our underclassmen, they're doing a good job, getting better and working hard at it. The faster they mature, the better we'll be. That's a good thing. I think our older guys certainly played their best Saturday. And we need everybody to kind of keep moving forward. And this team overall, I've really been pleased with their work attitude, their ethic and attitude has been positive. Going back to January that hasn't been the issue. We just haven't maybe focused as well as we need to or certainly execute as well as we need to, but we're gaining ground, hopefully.

Q. One of the plays that Jake hit Tevaun Smith with, he threw the ball before Tevaun cut. It was a really sharp cut.

COACH FERENTZ: That was a really good play.

Q. Do you think the receivers ran sharper routes than they had been in that game?

COACH FERENTZ: I think our execution was pretty good. That was a Kodak moment, that play. I happened to really have a nice vantage point. I was looking right through Tevaun at least where he's making the break to Jake. And if you can get the timing down to that extent, it's really hard for somebody to find use of that. That's maybe as good a play as we've had in a while from that standpoint.

Q. Wide receiver group seemed like it

changed gears on the fly. Matt was your leading receiver Saturday. Usually Kevonte is there. What makes that group tick?

COACH FERENTZ: Part of it is who is healthy. Matt's been injured. Really limited. It was disappointing because he was productive for us. Had a great spring last year and we thought he might be able to really give us some good plays this year. But when guys are hurt, it's hard and that's a tough thing.

But the guys that are out there are the ones that are going to go and the good news is I think our older guys are doing a good job. Kevonte is really playing well for us and making some really big plays. Tevaun is doing the same thing. And their entire games are getting better, not just the receiving part.

Jake Hilliard is a guy who keeps doing good things for us and it was good to get Matt involved the other day. So whoever is healthy hopefully can go out and help us out a little bit.

Q. How is Andre Harris doing?

COACH FERENTZ: He has an injury. Hasn't been in the two-deep. Didn't bring it up. But he's going to give it a shot today.

Q. What kind of challenges will your defensive line face against Minnesota, and what's your confidence level in that unit right now at how well they play?

COACH FERENTZ: I alluded to earlier, every week seems to be a little bit different challenge when you set out to play. That's how it is with college football week-to-week. This is a team that runs the ball extremely well. The running back is nationally ranked. I think seventh in the country right now. 150 yards a game, whatever it may be. About five a carry, I know that much.

So they've got a system that really is tough to defend. The quarterback's a good runner for them and does a great job. But up front they're just really a veteran group and they're doing really well.

And they've got their system. They believe in it. They know it inside and out. And that's what good running teams do. They have something they believe in. We're veteran up front, too, so it ought to be a real tough contest on both sides.

Q. Damien Wilson, do they try to scheme to get him through to the ball?

COACH FERENTZ: They've been doing the same thing they've been doing since Coach Kill

got there schematically. They're very athletic. They all run very well. They've got a couple of tough guys inside that kind of help block things up. But the rest of their guys are all -- which is probably why they're good on special teams. I think they're built for speed and movement. And they do a good job.

And their scheme, it's like the offensive part, you can't just tee off on one thing, because they're going to keep you on your toes, and if you're not sound on your techniques, starting with your fundamental awareness, you're going to miss out.

Q. The play calling seemed to change a lot from the Maryland game to Saturday. Was that because of the circumstances in that game or did you guys change things during the bye week at all?

COACH FERENTZ: I said two weeks ago, maybe two weeks ago or last week, if we're throwing the ball 50 plus times, it's probably not a good sign. I think it was more of a byproduct of the score, the way the game was going. We prefer not to play like that, but we'll probably be in that situation again.

If we are, we'll have to do better, execute better. But if you write a script -- the problem with the scripts is they don't always cooperate. You don't always get the chance to stay on the script and that's the deal.

Q. Drew Ott has developed a lot from a year ago. Is that from going against Brandon every day?

COACH FERENTZ: Third-year guy now. That's like Louie. He got banged around a couple years ago. Last year he played at a high level. And he was doing the same. And Drew, Drew played really well last year. I think he's just now in year three and it makes a big difference, especially when you're an interior player, one of those guys that's putting his hand on the ground.

So his development, he works extremely hard, strength and conditioning, and works hard at the mental part of the football, the game and he competes hard on the field. So it's just -- we kind of made that decision like Tevaun, we pulled the trigger on both those guys couple years ago thinking maybe we can get them there faster. And I think we're reaping that benefit right now. But we'll be missing it two years from now. Whatever

year that is, 17 or 16, whatever it is.

Q. Part of what Louie does, is a lot of that or some percentage of that is the fact that he is the double teamed every time?

COACH FERENTZ: No, because he's not just a three techniquer in those. Both guys play both positions. I don't think people are scheming at all. They're just blocking us the way they block us. And Louie understands leverage. He's got a real high degree of mental toughness, and he works hard. He just plays hard and guys that do that are hard to block.

Q. Max Williams seems to be a tough matchup for just anybody?

COACH FERENTZ: Arch rival. Loving it. His dad had a great pro career. Great player at Minnesota, and we knew about Max and never got the chance to recruit him. He committed really early. And he's done an outstanding job.

He's a really good football player and a great young man. Got to meet him four years ago, five years ago. His dad and Bob Cratchit are really good friends. So Max was actually down here might have been ninth grade, tenth grade, he probably committed about a month later. Made a big impression on him. Minnesota, obviously, not Iowa.

Q. Punt return seems to struggle at times. How much has that been on blocking and how much has been underturning --

COACH FERENTZ: It's both. And it's getting more and more challenging. I think college punt rules are totally screwed up, quite frankly. So it's just getting more and more challenging. If you have Deion Sanders back there, you've got a better chance. But with just the free release and all the stuff you see, that's my personal commentary. I hate college punting rules but nobody cares.

Q. What is it about the rules?

COACH FERENTZ: Just that you can snap the ball. Everybody runs down the field. Nobody has to block. Nobody has to wait for the ball to get kicked. It's just -- what it's morphed into is not really my cup of tea. But again I'm about in the three percent of a hundred. So it would be like 97 percent the other direction.

Q. How does the NFL do it, how different?

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COACH FERENTZ: Have only a couple of guys go down until the ball is kicked. Kind of more of a sport that way. But anyway...

Q. You mentioned special teams at Minnesota, never seems to change, they're one of the best teams in the country and kickoff return beat Northwestern a couple of weeks ago. Are they better than they've been in the past?

COACH FERENTZ: I think they are. Yes, because they've got better -- they've recruited well. They've really recruited well. Beyond that, I go back to I think this is really significant when Jerry went up there, they basically had their staff intact. It wasn't like they were bringing, we got here in '99 we had whatever it was nine guys from nine different spots pretty much.

So we're putting our playbook together trying to figure out who and what we were and all that kind of stuff when they knew it right away. They recruited well towards their system. They've got the kind of players defensively that really fit in well to make good special teams players and they've got good specialists too, which is a big part of special teams. Done a good job.

Q. Marshall Koehn, last week him kicking short, was that by design or --

COACH FERENTZ: No, not necessarily. There was a little breeze, didn't seem like it but there was a breeze coming the other direction but coming out of the south. There was more returning from that direction. The good news is we covered well. I wasn't sure if we could cover anything or not. But we did a pretty good job which was encouraging.

Q. Punter?

COACH FERENTZ: Up in the air. We'll see how this week goes and go from there.

Q. I feel like there's a sense among a lot of college football people to not buy into this Minnesota team even though they're 6 and 2. Yeah, but I don't know who they beat. They are for real?

COACH FERENTZ: Comments like that, if you don't have to compete against them you can make things like that, that's probably somebody sitting in a studio. With all due respect to all you guys, okay, but if you actually watch film and watch

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how programs are built and watch how teams are built and if you've actually got to go out on the field and compete against people, which I gotta go back couple of years ago when we got our tails kicked pretty good up there in 2011.

You know, it's a lot easier to talk about things if you're not having to do it. That's how I look at it. And they're 6 and 2. Extremely well coached and good players and I know we have our hands full. People are probably saying the same thing about us. That would make it a surely even match.

Q. It's another trophy game, last trophy game, didn't go so well against Iowa State. How much do you talk about holding on to Floyd with the guy?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll talk about it. But it's like nobody owns it. That trophy. And I guess we've had it this past year. But it's up for grabs again. Nobody owns it right now that's what this game's all about and we'll see how it goes Saturday.

Q. Fourth time in five years going up there you probably know how to get up there pretty easily?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I guess we can blame that on expansion. Just like Northwestern can blame coming here. I think they're 3 out of 4. So just quirks with expansion and what have you. At least it's a really nice town to visit. I think our fans like going up there, going there and Chicago, it's a nice town.

Q. Did Coach Davis call the plays against Northwestern?

COACH FERENTZ: This past weekend, you're talking about? He's called them ever since he got here. Did you hear something I didn't hear? Was it someone from above calling the plays? (Laughter) psychic. Rosie the Fortune Teller. That's good.

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