

October 25, 2011



An interview with:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome. Just a couple things of note. Looks like we'll have a chance to get Nardo and Hitchens and Nielsen back this week. Like most weeks, we got probably eight or 10 guys that are banged up right now. See how the week goes with them. Probably like everybody else in the conference.

We have the same captains. We have Mike Daniels and Tyler Nielsen on the defensive side, McNutt and Vandenberg offensively.

Last weekend, obviously a good win. Happy to get the win. The crowd was fantastic. Our crowds have been tremendous. We appreciate that certainly. Last but not least just happy for Marv McNutt receiving Big Ten Player of the Week honors, with other good players. Nice tribute for him to finish up the weekend.

We move on now to Minnesota. Their team is very well-coached. They're playing very hard. Jerry Kill has done a great job everywhere he's been. Has a tremendous staff. A lot of those guys have been with him for quite some time. As I mentioned, their team is playing hard right now. They're probably making too many mistakes, he'd probably be the one to tell you, that hurt them.

The area they're doing the best is on special teams. No big surprise. Playing hard in all three phases. Special teams-wise is probably the top feature for them right now. Leading the Big Ten in kickoff coverage. Gives you the indication of the attitude of a football team. They're working hard at it.

Played a couple good teams the last couple times out. All I know is we're going on the road. We haven't won on the road yet. It's going

to be a big challenge for us. Turn our sights to Minnesota this weekend and get going here.

Q. With injuries, how hard is it to build cohesion on a defense?

COACH FERENTZ: It's a challenge. We've been through that before, too. It's just a matter of trying to get better every week. That's what we have to do.

Q. Is Keenan in that eight to 10 group?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah. He's got a tender ankle right now. We'll just see how the week goes with all these guys. Hopefully most of them will be back.

Q. Been nearly a full year since this program won a game on the road. What has been the problem, if you could point any factors out?

COACH FERENTZ: I'll go back to this game last year. We didn't play well and they did. It's about as simple as that. They came ready to play; we did not. They outplayed us all three areas.

We played fine in Arizona. I count that. That's not a home environment. So there's no mystique about being in a different place. It's just how you handle things and how you play that given day. We certainly didn't do well up in Minneapolis last year. We didn't deserve to win. They did. That's about as simple as that right there.

Q. In the past couple weeks, it seems like Marcus has seemed to get going. Are you getting closer to where you want to be as far as that idea of balance offensively?

COACH FERENTZ: I think so. I think his yards-per-carry was up around six last weekend. Pretty good the week before. The biggest thing, that stuff is kind of important, but it's just an indicator of what we're seeing on the field. He's

running a little bit more decisively now, a little more confidently. As I mentioned, he was a little nicked up in camp. When players miss practice time, significant time, it tends to show on the field.

With him gaining ground, that's helpful. See if we can get some other guys to help out too which is going to be necessary the next five weeks.

Q. (Question regarding expectations after the Insight Bowl.)

COACH FERENTZ: I think I was aware of that. Occasionally people get a little carried away with a one-game performance. Occasionally that happens. That's the downside of doing well in a stretch or in a particular game.

But for anybody to expect the guy to come in and get 220 yards a game is probably unrealistic. Those things just happen. When they do happen, it's great. That's usually not the norm.

That's something we tried to guard against in coaching. Got to be realistic about expectations, worry about what's in front of you. But you can't do anything about injuries. He practiced well in the spring. Had little tough stretch in camp. He's on the right path now and it's good to see he's running hard.

Q. Why have you been good in the red zone?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if there's any secret. We've done a good job of executing on both sides of the ball. Defensively we're fortunate there. They've been moving the ball up and down the field pretty readily on us. We have to continue to be good there. Offensively it's pretty good. Especially if you're scoring touchdowns, that helps.

Q. James' progression as a quarterback, how big of a benchmark would getting a first road win be for him?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, we just need it as a team. We need the win on the road. We haven't done that. We're 0-2 right now. Coincidentally we're on the road this week. But his role will be a big part of that. It won't be the only factor, but it will certainly be a big part. I'm sure he'll be ready to go.

Q. Do you think we'll see Derby at linebacker Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: I doubt it. What he did Saturday was real encouraging, this past Saturday. Basically he ran down and did

something he's never had training for. He did it better than most guys do after training. That's a good sign. Did a nice job of avoiding a blocker. Maybe he executed that technique in high school. Made a nice tackle. For not really knowing what he was doing, that he was pretty encouraging. Now the work really begins for him, learning the calls, technique, all that type of thing.

Based on that one play, that's certainly something easy to get excited about. Now we can build from there. His attitude is good. I think he's excited about this whole challenge.

Q. Put him on some more special teams?

COACH FERENTZ: We gave him a crash course last week. Started Tuesday. If it's not this week, that's our goal, is to get him up and running. That's the first place he can hit the field. I think it's realistic based on what we saw Saturday.

Q. How much of A.J.'s move over to linebacker is an indication that maybe Jake is further along than you expected? Are you happy with where he's at?

COACH FERENTZ: We've only seen him for a couple of months, but we like what we see. All that being said, he hasn't been in a game. A.J. hasn't either. We don't know a lot about the quarterback position once you get past James.

One thing about quarterbacks, only one can play. It's not like a running back where you can rotate a couple guys through there. In looking at our depth chart, our needs right now, the propensity we've had for having a need forlinebackers over the last two years, just seemed like a logical move.

The nice thing about it is he's still got three years in the program. It's a little bit beyond just this week or next week, but long-term is going to be a positive thing for him.

Q. Do you see him sticking at linebacker? He has the frame to play defensive end as well.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's bigger than some of the guys we've had, the way they started out. Our intent right now is for him to be a linebacker. We haven't thought much beyond that.

Q. De'Andre had a nice block. Are you feeling more comfortable with him?



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COACH FERENTZ: Yeah. When we put him in there the last two weeks, he's improved in practice. I think he's starting to come along, which is a positive. We need that. It was good having Canzeri in there last week, too. Hopefully we're gaining a little ground with both those guys.

Q. What is Mika'il McCall's situation?

COACH FERENTZ: He did some good things last week. We'll see what this week brings. He's been cleared medically. Last week he was out there in gear, all that type of thing. It's a matter of how quickly he can get caught up and how good he feels. A big difference between being cleared medically and really being able to play. That's the next hurdle for him to overcome.

We'll give him some work this week and see what happens.

Q. How significant is that with Marcus last year sustaining broken bones early on. One had a full month of camp where Marcus didn't.

COACH FERENTZ: I think from that standpoint, Mika'il would be further ahead than Marcus would have been. I'd counter that by saying the injuries are a little bit different. The collarbones are pretty predictable. We had a pretty good idea what the range would be, how he'd work back from there. It was pretty much set in stone. It worked out that way. Whereas with Mika'il, we'll see what happens. He really hasn't done a lot of hard cutting, a lot of hard this and that. The nature of that position, it's not that your collarbone is not a factor as a running back, but that lower leg stuff is.

We'll see how he does this week and next week going forward.

Q. Red jersey in practice?

COACH FERENTZ: No. It's just a matter of how much he can do, how much volume he can handle.

Q. (Question regarding the amount of points the defense has been giving up.)

COACH FERENTZ: Anytime we give up any points, that's not good. We're not playing well. First thing that jumps out at you if you look at the stats is third down. We have to do a better job on third down. That's probably the most obvious thing. Like most things, it's more complicated than that. Third down is a combination of a lot of different things. What you do first, second down plays into that.

I would say if we're looking for one thing to start with, if you will, the makable third downs, third-and-longs, third-and-mediums where our personnel should be getting off the field. We have to do a better job there, it would be a good starting point.

Q. What is the challenge in trying to shut down a guy like Gray?

COACH FERENTZ: Just what you said. He can do both. He's a different runner than what we've seen. I don't know if we've played any guys that are 240. This guy is a strong, powerful running back when he runs the ball. He's also got a strong arm.

Physique-wise, I haven't thought about it, probably have to go back to like Juice Williams - was that his name - at Illinois? Probably have to go back to him. He was a big guy back there that could do some things.

That's one thing, it seems like every week you're playing guys that can do both with their feet. Just a different kind of feet this time. Those feet are a little heavier and stronger than what we've been seeing.

Q. Seems like a lot of losses this year, your team is taken out early. Is that important for this team, that you get off to a good start?

COACH FERENTZ: I suggest that's good in any game. Certainly when you're on the road it's a good thing, too. It doesn't assure you of anything. The biggest thing I think, we see these guys, they're playing extremely hard right now, Minnesota is. Maybe a couple snapshot moments out there for you would be in the Michigan game they returned a kickoff for a touchdown. It was called back on a penalty. They had a nice long punt return, too, which was called back on a penalty. They're dangerous and they're capable. They've got a lot of good players that are really playing hard.

Mistake here or there will pop up. It seems to be the Achilles' heel right now. When you have a coaching transition, I think that's probably not uncommon. It's part of something you work through. That's one of the challenges. But we're going to have to be at our best, I know that.

Q. Is it strange to be playing Minnesota in October, not the end of the season?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I was thinking

we hadn't done it since '82. But I think that's wrong. Pretty sure it's wrong. Yeah, was there sometime in the last 13 years we've played other than at the end? Maybe not.

Q. '04.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, okay. '82 is like my Kodak moment. I remember '81, too, obviously. '81 was here, '82 up there, '84 up there. So I guess '83 was at the end of the year. I remember that one distinctly.

All that being said, it's a game on the road. We're in Minnesota. I predict it might be a little warmer than last time. That's a good thing.

Q. Is this a more difficult venue than the Dome?

COACH FERENTZ: I think any on-campus venue is a positive. I think if you're the home team, you'd much rather be on campus. I think that's a good thing for them. It's a beautiful stadium.

Q. Can you talk about this rivalry. Do you have any memories from it?

COACH FERENTZ: Right back to '81. They beat us straight up. We had a pretty good team. They beat us straight up. That's when I learned about Floyd. They came across, grabbed him right out of our bench area. That's not really fun. That's when I kind of figured out what that is all about. We had a lot of great games through the history of the series.

Q. I don't know if you saw the Arizona/UCLA rumble on the field. The run for a trophy can lead to something bad. It seems to be growing. Is it opening guys up to an incident?

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't thought about that. First thing we have to do is win to have a chance to create some hostility. I hadn't thought about that one. I hope we have that issue. Not that issue, but...

Q. You said '81 kind of drove that home for you. Did last year drive it home for some of the players that are back this year?

COACH FERENTZ: I think anytime you lose a trophy, if it doesn't impact you, you're probably not paying attention. Last November, the way we played that day, looked like none of us were paying attention quite frankly. That wasn't much fun.

Q. What happened that day or leading up to that day?

COACH FERENTZ: All I can tell you is we've had a couple very I don't know if 'memorable' is the right word, that doesn't have a negative connotation, but a couple games that really stick in your mind. That's certainly one of them. '06 is another one up there. If you're in coaching long enough, things like that happen, I suppose. At least they say they do.

If I knew what happened, I'd try to answer it. But I just hope it doesn't happen again.

Q. Was it a combination of things going up to that game, the games before it, or something that rose up?

COACH FERENTZ: I look at every weekend independently. That's how I look at things typically. To me, my guess is they probably practiced a lot better than we did. Although our practice wasn't bad that week. I remember the week fairly well.

But, for the 60 minutes the game went on, they beat us in every phase possible including coaching. It's a credit to them. They got the job done; we didn't. That game was scheduled Thanksgiving, all that stuff, that game was scheduled for months. We knew what we had to do and we didn't do it.

Q. After that game Reisner said he didn't feel good going into that. Did you have any sense?

COACH FERENTZ: No, not till the game started. When the game started, it clearly looked like we weren't interested in competing. That's not a good thing.

They were. They were excited about being there; we weren't.

Q. You couldn't tell in warmups?

COACH FERENTZ: No. I can't tell anything in warmups. Usually you think you're going to do okay, you do bad. You think you're going to do bad, you do well. Gave up on that one.

Q. The numbers going towards the defense are big. How is the attitude with coaches and the group?

COACH FERENTZ: I think good, as far as I know. Good, yeah. I think everybody is not

dressed in black or anything like that. We're going back to work. We have work to do. I think we're all aware of that.

We'll just keep pushing and see if we can't improve. Our whole football team is like that. We have a lot of things we're working on right now.

Q. How much do you maybe think about deviating from the style of play to compensate? 3-4, zone, blitz, a lot of different things. Is that possible or is it stick with what works?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think you try to adjust who you are. You are who you are. That changes with personnel. Just had a guy on the phone from up there ask me about looks like we're more of a passing team than a running team. The image of our team has been that we're a running team, which I guess that's true. I don't know if it is or not. It certainly was when Shonn Greene was here. You lean towards what you have, what you're best at.

But I think, again, perception. We're probably doing a little bit more intricate than meets the naked eye. We're trying to make some adjustments that will help us, continue to tinker. You can't just change the face of what you do I don't think. It means you just got wiped out at a position or you hit the panic button, which I don't think we're in that situation in either case, so...

Q. When you recruit to play a certain defense, does that make it impossible to change on the fly like that?

COACH FERENTZ: My experience at least, if you wanted to go to a 3-4 team, it's more about the linemen. You have to have linebackers obviously. There's one more than you would in a 4-3. It's really about your linemen. It's a whole different type of lineman that you play with. I don't know that it would suit what we have if you're looking at that.

There's a lot of things you can do. Typically what you do is you adjust within your system. Just like us, to the guy in Minnesota's point, we're throwing the ball better right now than we are running it. I would suggest the last two weeks we've made some improvement. The numbers would still say I think we threw it for more than we passed it last Saturday. I think we did both effectively.

That's the whole idea, to be effective and efficient. If you can find a way to do that. I told him a lot of people still think of Iowa being the big

linemen. I think we've had the smallest offensive line in the last decade. I bet you everybody in the conference thinks we have the biggest. We're the only team without a 300-pounder on the line.

Q. Do you have a feeling one way or the other about paying players?

COACH FERENTZ: No, not right now. I think it's a complex equation, yeah. I don't know. I'm sure somebody's thinking about it.

Q. How key are the weather conditions when it comes to how much you throw the ball on offense?

COACH FERENTZ: Still to me the biggest factor in sports is wind. That's the biggest thing. That sure affects the passing game. We've had a couple Thursdays, if we played on those Thursdays, it would have been pretty interesting. We had to go in the stadium just for safety reasons. That to me is the biggest factor.

But again it gets back to what we believe. We believe you have to try to be balanced and do both effectively. It's not about the numbers, but being able to do what you want a little bit. Knowing we don't play a running quarterback, that's not our style of offense, we're unique in that direction, too. It's just a matter of finding out who you are and what you are from there.

Q. The depth chart was different in '04. Drew came in and showed you guys right away what he was about, got a second team behind Chandler. Has Jake impressed you guys or can you make a comparison between those two?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, no, I can't. Jake Rudock?

Q. Yes.

COACH FERENTZ: I thought you were going to go down to Vandenberg, compare those two. But no, Jake hasn't played at all, so no. He's not really running, too. Can't compare them. Different people. I can compare them as people.

I just talked to a guy from Calgary last night. I guess Drew is doing well. No big surprise. Might play 20 years up there.

Q. Just a different situation?

COACH FERENTZ: We're getting John ready right now. That's what we're doing.

Q. Has he improved?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah.

Q. People talk about the future with Jake.

COACH FERENTZ: John is the next guy in. I'm a lot more focused on this week and this season than next year or 10 years from now. That's kind of what we're looking at.

Q. A.J. beat him out in the pre-season. You must have seen something in John throughout this season.

COACH FERENTZ: It's a combination of we have confidence in John and we also have a real need at linebacker. That's kind of the whole deal.

Q. Was there a thought about putting John in earlier in the fourth quarter? James took shots down around the knee late.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I missed that. No, I guess to answer the question. We're having a hard time. We just wanted to win the game. That's what we were thinking about.

Thank you.

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