

October 16, 2007



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: I was going to do this regardless of how the game turned out this weekend. Win or lose, I want to take a minute and hit a couple thoughts actually.

I do my best to try to ignore, just kind of breeze through some things. I think last week a couple words I heard was you were a victim, blueprints were brought up. I think I've read about my salary in a couple articles about a million times it seems like. And I hate to waste time in here or anywhere, but there were two articles I think I just need to address a little bit that came up last week.

One was about our offensive line in the Penn State game. One of the first things that jumped out at me, the article kind of slammed Penn State's defense, their front, suggested maybe they weren't real good. I've been around the game a little bit. They're not a bad group up front, they're not a bad group defensively. I think if you look at the statistics, if you look what they did last weekend, they're a pretty good football team.

But the thing that concerned me most was probably -- we had an individual get singled out in that article that really hasn't played very much here, and I'm just a little worried about the judgment used there.

The article suggested maybe the coaches weren't playing the best players or perhaps that player wasn't producing. You know, to me it just kind of -- a couple fronts there, a couple observations. You know, as coaches I think what we try to do is decide who gives us our best chance to have success offensively, defensively, special teams, based on the exposure that we get, which I think are significantly more than most outsiders have.

That's really what we judge our players on. I don't think we have agendas other than trying to give ourselves the best chance to win, be productive. That's our job. And I think history would show that we've played first year guys,

fourth year guys, fifth year guys, we've played guys that were heavily recruited and we've played walk-ons. We had a pretty good one in here this past weekend that was a walk-on. So there's really no criteria there.

And then the other thing I'm really concerned about, and I've talked about this before, when expectations are put on players based on criteria that really to me is irrelevant how a guy is going to play in college. In other words, how a guy performs in high school, it's an indicator, but it's not the direct reason a guy is going to do well or not do well in college. Experts' opinions, you know, sometime they're right on, sometimes they're way off. And the same thing happens in the NFL Draft. You know, that concerned me a little bit.

Probably the worst thing is it's kind of a hurtful thing for the individual involved, and I think we went down that path a couple of years ago. So I'm hopeful that we can maybe stay off that topic.

The other thing I'd bring up, just a little bit of history, some of the guys in the room would appreciate this, during my time in the '80s I coached three different guys as a line coach here. They didn't start until their fifth year; all three guys went on and had NFL careers.

And probably the most dramatic, there's one guy that came into camp second team as a fifth-year senior, the guy gets drafted in the third round. We had one guy, and I don't think he'd mind me naming names, I'm pretty correct I wasn't here when Ron Hallstrom came as a recruit, but the understanding I had, I had got there two years later, he was hailed as the next Joe Greene; he's going to save the defense and all that kind of stuff. Had a good career. And came in and really couldn't cut it the first year, didn't work out. The second year they moved him to offense, red shirted.

So I get here for his fifth year, and to this day I still think if he hadn't played well in his opening ballgame against Nebraska, I'm not sure what that would have done to him because he wasn't the most confident guy going into that game. Played extremely well, played well the whole season, got drafted the first round, played 13 years.

When I was in Pittsburgh the year before

we had a guy, Jimbo Covert, who is probably one of the finest linemen I've ever seen anywhere. I was there the year he moved over to offense, big strong guy, physical guy, first-round pick, my pick as first rounder, and it jumped out at me just how much confidence he lacked.

The thing I just want to share is that when you're talking about people in college, you know, these guys are people. They're working through issues, problems, they're trying to get their feet on the ground, they're doing the best they can. Boy, I'd really encourage everybody to be careful with the kind of expectations they put on individual players. I struggle with that.

Then the other one, too, that came across, and this is -- maybe I've got rabbit ears, but there was an interview done at the end of the week with a former player, and after that -- the article really wasn't very complimentary I don't think for our program, how he was representing the program. I don't think it was fair to the player or representative of the player.

It got me thinking a little bit, geez, I wonder if the writer of the article contacted anybody else, other former players. We've got a lot of them, you know, a guy like Miguel Merrick, Yanda, Jones, Elgin, Champ Davis. And Elgin, Davis and Jones were here on Saturday, and I just kind of asked them, by chance did any writer try to contact you guys last week? No, they didn't. I wondered about Dallas, Dallas hasn't been contacted, Brad Banks, I didn't get a chance to ask Brad, but there was a multitude of guys that probably could have been contacted but didn't get contacted.

It seemed like we focused in on one individual. So my next thing is, boy, maybe he was fishing for something, a little fishing expedition and what have you, and I think the author landed what he wanted.

So the next question there is, boy, what's the motive? What would make a guy sit down and want to do that? So I had to think about that a little bit.

Pretty much all I could come up with is we're going through a bumpy time, and we're still right in the middle of it. I guess this person, and believe me, I understand people have jobs, if you're a columnist you're trying to sell papers and try and create interest, but from where I sat it seemed like somebody trying to stir the pot and make something a little tougher and make it worse.

I don't know, I guess that's what I enjoy about what I do because we're not about dividing, we're not about trying to split people, we're trying to bring them together and work on improvement.

Bottom line is I just feel kind of fortunate, I guess, to be in coaching.

And I know, too, by mentioning this stuff I run the risk of being a target because I've seen other people be targets in recent history at this University, and it's unfortunate, too. But if I've got a bull's eye, if that make the bull's eye bigger, so be it.

But I really struggle, particularly with the second article. Part of the reason I bring this up, you know, I know it's not popular right now that I'm not letting first-year starters talk and visit with the media, and it really is unfortunate. It's unfortunate Brett Greenwood couldn't have been interviewed or Derrell, and we've got a lot of great guys.

But when things like this take place, I hope you can understand maybe why I am a little bit reserved and protective and probably understand why a guy like Joe Paterno would keep the quarterback out of the media the week we played him. I guess from a coaching standpoint that's how I would look at it. Sorry about wasting however many minutes. I'll do that once every decade, I promise you.

Anyway, moving forward, I just want to congratulate Mike Humpal certainly on his national and Big Ten award. I'd also like to just mention Northern Iowa. I understand they were voted No. 1 in the country, and I'm sure Coach Farley and his staff will be the first ones to tell you it really doesn't count in October. But it's still a heck of a great recognition for what they're doing, so it's great to see.

Our captains this week, we've got Mike Humpal and Bryan Mattison defensively. We've got Albert Young and Tom Busch on offense, same guys as last week, and I know they'll do a great job. Injury-wise, it looks right now like Pat Angerer is out. Naturally, we had Coleman get hurt two Thursdays ago, so last week it was Pat Angerer's chance. We can't get through a Thursday workout it seems like without missing somebody. Most likely he'll be out this week. He may have an outside chance.

On the good news front, Klinkenborg, Moylan, Moeaki and Bruggeman will start working back a little bit. They haven't practiced in weeks, almost seems like a month it's close to. So I don't know what speed they'll be able to go at today, how the week will pan out, but at least they have a chance maybe to dress Saturday, and we'll see how it goes.

Then Purdue is going to be another challenge for us. I think we saw Saturday nothing is going to come easy for our football team I think

it's fair to say right now. It's just the way we're built. This will be a tough challenge too, because this is a good football club, a lot like Indiana, a lot like Illinois in that they've got a ton of veterans back. Count them up, they've got about nine starters on each side of the ball from a year ago, and then they've got their specialists back, too.

They're a good ball club, vintage Purdue. Purdue has done what it takes to win through the years. Coach Tiller has done a great job, but I think their preference is they like to throw the football. And they've got a guy in Painter who can really wing it around. They've got a good line, a veteran line, and they've got an excellent corps of receivers, including their tight end, so they're a very good offensive football team.

Defensively, again, they've got all their guys back and they're a tough scheme to get ready for. We're looking forward to it. It's going to be a tough week, tough challenge for us, but we're looking forward to a good week of practice. It will be fun to get back out there today, and we'll see what happens.

I'll throw it out to questions.

Q. Can you just talk about Mike Humpal and his performance on Saturday and what you've seen from him as a player progressing through his career?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, you know, Mike has come down a tough road, first of all. The first thing that jumps out, we were so impressed with him in high school, excellent football player, but a great wrestler. But a tremendous person, great student.

And he's done the same thing here. But he's had a tough career from an injury standpoint. Can't say enough about how he's persevered or worked through it. The first year back was extremely tough for him, but fortunately the last two years have been really -- he's had a little good fortune, but he's worked hard for that. He's played extremely well all season long, and I think with Mike being out, maybe he picked it up even another notch, but he's really doing a great job for us. It's nice to see his efforts recognized like that.

Q. Is the next step for this offense the red zone execution?

COACH FERENTZ: Points, hopefully. The good news is we moved the ball. We drove it. Sustained drive, certainly we're better on third down. We still had a couple first down mishaps and first play of the game penalty, uh-oh, here we go again. I thought we executed much better. We

were basically better in every phase, but now we've got to score some points.

We found a way to stop ourselves. Not to discredit Illinois, they did a good job, too, but when you get down in there you've got to come away with points, and we didn't do a very good job of that.

Our execution in practice was better, and I think the key thing for us is to recognize we need to keep pushing forward or it's not going to happen. We're young, and the guys made some strides that ought to help their confidence. But we've got to keep helping our confidence by working hard, too.

Q. The guard spot, is that an open competition right now?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think every position on our team is pretty much open, although we have some seniors playing pretty well, but we're still a team that's only won one game in the Big Ten. That being said, I'm not displeased with anybody's effort. I think they're all doing a good job. We'll see how the week goes. Probably safe to say all the guys will play, but the amount of playing time will be dictated by how they practice.

Q. Have you seen Brandon Myers grow, kind of gain confidence in the past month?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I talked a little bit earlier in the season about Tony taking that next step with Scott being gone, and obviously we've had Tony for a month, or close to a month. So I think that's given him a chance to work -- the load has fallen on his shoulders, and in a perfect world we would have liked to have both guys operating.

But I think Brandon is continuing to make improvement. He's one of the guys I mentioned a year ago that really did a great job in December. I thought he was maybe, if not our most improved player, certainly in the top two or three. So yeah, he's doing a good job. We're pleased about that.

And the other day Allen Reisner got 25 plays out there, which was huge. He's a young guy still, but at least he's making some progress, too.

When we do get Tony, if we can get him back this week or next week, if we can get him back, that will put us in a little healthier situation.

Q. I don't think he was your blocking tight end, but he's had a lot of blocking come on his plate lately?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we're hoping all of our tight ends will block a little bit. They really need to. And I think that's where he made the strides in December. He's always had very good ball skills. As you know, he was a very good high school basketball player. But the blocking was the part that he had to catch up on. And I thought in December he really made some strides there, to the point where we felt like, boy, either he or Tony out there would be able to compete the way we want them to.

I think he's doing a good job. He's played a lot of snaps, so we've got to watch him right now and make sure we don't wear him out and he's got some gas in the tank on Saturday.

Q. Talk about moving the ball, Purdue's defense has given up a lot of points.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, they have, but they've played two pretty high caliber teams. I think Michigan and Ohio State are separating themselves a little bit from a lot of the teams in the league. So we're going to have a challenge there. A lot of the same guys are playing better than a year ago.

It's kind of like Illinois. I think they're very similar in that regard. A lot of guys back from a year ago, a lot of familiar faces. But like you'd expect, they're playing at a higher level than they were a year ago.

The challenge is for us to make sure we're playing better than last week and the week before. We're going to go into battle and see what happens, but we've got to figure out a way to get some points up there.

Q. How much did having the ball for 35 minutes help the defense have fresher legs, especially in that second half?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I thought that was a huge factor with Penn State, the fact that we couldn't sustain drives, couldn't do much offensively. I think our defense, if we can keep them to a limited -- not a limited but a reasonable amount of reps or snaps in a game, obviously our chances for success go up a little bit. I think they all enjoy -- appreciated a little chance to sit on the bench the other day. I don't know how many minutes we are behind right now season-wise, but it's five minutes in the bank, so hopefully we'll keep pushing in that direction.

Q. How much of a step forward was Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it was major. We just needed some success, first and foremost.

As I've been saying, our guys have worked hard. Their attitude has been great. But at some point you've got to have a little reward in there, too. There's no guarantees you're going to get one, but it certainly is important. And I think it just kind of verified for a lot of the guys on the team that, hey, you know, things can work out, we've just got to keep pushing, keep working through some issues and challenges.

You know, you learn a lot out of losing, and we certainly have learned enough this year, so hopefully we can start pushing forward the other direction.

Q. Do you think it was a real departure for your defense against Purdue personnel-wise? I might be wrong in that, but you ran a lot of dime, a lot of nickel and a lot of personnel. You're young in the secondary. Are you guys maybe ready to duplicate that this year?

COACH FERENTZ: The first part of the season we didn't do much as you know. The past couple weeks, although last week didn't necessitate it as much, but prior to that we've been mixing it in. I'm not as worried maybe as much about our experience or age right now.

If Devan can come back and play, which is probably not realistic just because he hasn't done much and he's still kind of sore, so if we can get some back that would be a boost. We're getting a little thin at safety right now. We might be able to sub a little bit, but it just kind of depends on what our health status is more than anything.

Q. What did the film show about the punting situation? It seems like once every ten times it goes maybe somewhere other than it should.

COACH FERENTZ: There's going to be a guy at the game Saturday, Jason Baker, who's still doing it for a living right now doing well. I don't know crap about kicking, you guys know that, or punting. But I go back to our first year here, and he was all over the place in '99 as a junior, and then his 2000 season was pretty nice.

The way I look at it, here's a guy who's still punting, and as late as his junior year he was all over the place -- not all over the place but inconsistent. I think we're living with that with Ryan a little bit, but I really think he's done a lot of positive things. I really focus on those positives.

I thought at Penn State -- outside of the one, but he gave us a heck of a chance with some big punts early and the one out of their student

section, that end zone where they have the student section, that really showed me a lot, too. The other day outside of his last one -- that was probably our fault. We probably should have said kick it out of the end zone, let it rip. He got a little cute there and it cost us a few yards.

I really think he's making progress, and the good news is he's got three years left after this. I'm looking at this thing as we're climbing -- just kind of like all our special teams, I think we're gaining ground right now. We're not there yet, but I think we're a lot better than we were a year ago.

Q. You don't just give him the ball to punt, you want to give him an idea of where you want the ball?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it was a plus 50 punt, so we're thinking inside the ten would be nice, inside the five would be better. But in retrospect, I wish I had grabbed him before going out to the field and said, hey, knock it through the goal post. We'll give it to them on the 20 and take our chances instead of the 28 or whatever it was, around the 30. Sometimes you shouldn't be greedy. Lesson learned.

Q. You can go from extreme to extreme like Illinois' running game and its passing game. Is that a challenge week to week?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it is a challenge. The good news is Purdue will run some option. The bad news is we probably won't see it. That preparation was good, but yeah, it's a very -- it's a shift back, so it's going to be a whole different preparation for us.

But again, the biggest challenge is you've got a quarterback who can really throw the football very well. It's one thing to say, hey, we're going to throw the ball around, but these guys really practice it, they execute it very well, they've got precision, they've got talent, and that's where the challenge is, just how they operate. We're going to have to try to be at our best.

Q. We've heard that rule about kind of putting last week's behind you after 24 hours. Is this week kind of one where you think about Saturday a little bit?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, somebody asked me about the losing streak the other day, and I think it's kind of the same way. You really don't have to mention things. Players know what's going on, and the good news is I think it ought to give us some confidence, it ought to show us -- be an illustration of what -- things can work if we continue to improve. But that being said, it's like

anything else, a loss shouldn't interfere with the next week's preparation. A win shouldn't, either. What we need to do right now is focus on what do we have to do to try to match up against Purdue in all phases of the game and get that preparation going today.

Q. Can you give a percentage chance of Moeaki playing Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: It's really tough for me to say because we haven't been on the field yet. If it was just on his attitude, 100 percent. He was telling us last week he could play. The problem was the doctors weren't agreeing. They get the final vote. But his attitude has been great. All those guys, they're eager to go.

Klink has been -- since Friday he's been really upbeat and feeling good. But he hasn't really worked out yet, either. He's finally worked out the last couple days, so hopefully when we go out there and push hard, he won't revert.

Q. How much of a confidence boost for the team would it be to get those guys even just back in practice?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, I think any time you get established starters back, it's a plus. That would certainly pertain to Tony. Rob Bruggeman is a very respected football player because of the kind of guy he is and the kind of player he is. You talk about Devan and Mike, both seniors, so you get seniors back that are good players, totally invested, that would be huge. And we're going to need every little bit of help we can get this weekend, so it would be great.

But it's not a situation where we can -- we have to plan right now like they're not going to be there, and then we'll be pleasantly surprised if they can.

Q. A big part of the reason you guys have been so good in turnover margin this year is Jake has only thrown two picks. Is there something about him that allows him to sort of stay out of that kind of trouble?

COACH FERENTZ: I think I mentioned maybe a week ago that I was almost worried that we had him too tight because he has done a phenomenal job. He made the one bad throw I think against Indiana, the one on the right boundary that was like, ooh, wow, but it was uncharacteristic of him because he just hasn't done -- it was a dumb play, and he hasn't made many of those.

But it really speak volumes, I think, about

him. Kind of like our punting situation, I look at Jake right now, I've been very obvious, but you look at the numbers, but he's doing a lot of things, too, real well. One of them is protecting the ball, making good decisions with it. The other thing I'm really impressed with is just his resiliency because it was a tough punt for everybody and we're hardly out of the woods at this stage. But the way he's handled tough circumstances, I've really got a lot of respect for the guy.

When you see things like that, you'd like to think that in time good things are going to happen and he's going to become a pretty good player. That's kind of my suspicion.

Q. You talked a little bit about the contributions of your true freshmen, and do you take it case by case or is it almost --

COACH FERENTZ: You know, I said a year ago probably like this time, maybe a little later in the season, that we probably missed the boat a little bit on some guys. But we didn't handicap any of the guys coming into the season.

Now Allen Reisner is a great example. If we had handicapped, he'd probably be down at that bottom tier of a guy that we thought could play -- prior to guessing before the guys get here, as I was saying earlier, until guys get out there on the field you really don't know how they're going to react or what they're going to do. No question he's been pressed into duty before his time, and if you had asked me in August, I would have said red shirt here, pretty safe. But we just haven't had that luxury, and to his credit. Lesson learned here, too, I think.

To his credit, being thrown into the situation, he's really done a nice job. He looked pretty overwhelmed the first couple weeks, but the last couple he's getting comfortable now. He's hardly a ready product, but he's doing a lot of good things.

So we've had guys in the special teams roles doing good things. We've had other guys that are actually playing like that. But yeah, they're all different studies. Bulaga came in, and boy, he just hit the ground running. He really looked good all throughout August. Still not quite sure if he's ready to play, but at least he's at that end of the scale.

But I think the bottom line is we're going to keep an open mind towards young guys playing. We're playing for today. We're not playing for three years from now, we're playing for today.

Q. That line, looking good, the second half line, looking good on film?

COACH FERENTZ: They got the job done. There's still a lot of work to do. It's like our team. We did better but we're hardly contenders for anything like now. Reality is we're still 1-3 in Big Ten play. So we have a lot of work to do. I think we all know that.

The only important thing really is what we do these next five weeks, what kind of strides can we make, are we going to keep pushing for it. If we do, hopefully it'll end up in the winning column and there's no guarantees.

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