

November 8, 2011



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Just on the injury front, as we suspected, Dominic Alvis is going to have to have knee surgery, so that'll be this week. If there's any good news, there are two things: He's not a senior, first and foremost, and then secondly, it looks like there's no complexity to it. He'll have to work through that, and it's just disappointing. He's done a good job in his first year of playing, so it's going to be a tough road for him, but he'll bounce back. He's a strong-minded guy. He'll do fine.

Our captains are the same four guys, Tyler Nielsen, Mike Daniels, Marvin McNutt and James Vandenberg.

Certainly it was a good win for us, a very hard-fought game, and now we go back to work. Got another real challenge on our hands. Michigan State is a team like last week's challenge, have a lot of good players, they're very experienced, very well coached and they're good in all three phases.

They're a little bit like the challenge last week. Very different in terms of schemes offensively and defensively, but they're alike in that you both have an identity, they both have an approach, and they really do a great job within their approach. They've got a bunch of good players in all phases, and they're very, very well coached, and they play well. They beat the team that we just beat by a couple touchdowns earlier. So that just gives you an idea of the level of difficulty here.

Also had a very dramatic win against Wisconsin, an excellent Wisconsin team. It's going to be a big challenge for us, and we'll go back to work today.

Q. A little bit off topic, but as a long-time admirer of Coach Paterno and all he's done for Penn State, I wonder what your take is on the recent events out there.

COACH FERENTZ: I've really been more focused on what we're doing here, getting through the weekend and then turning our sights to Michigan State. So that's really kind of where my thoughts have been, and the only thing I can really say is what anyone can say right now.

Q. How important is Brad Rogers to Marcus Coker these last four games?

COACH FERENTZ: I mentioned a while back it was great to have Brad get back just for obvious reasons, to get him on the field and back with the team. It was a really tough period for him being out and away, and he's improved and certainly it's not the same as, but Marcus Coker didn't get off to the fastest start because he missed a lot of time in August, and I think certainly with Brad we're seeing him improve each and every week. Having him out there gives us another good player and another really good guy. Not that he's played all that much, Morse has been our fullback, but he's been around and I think he's got a lot of confidence. I would classify him -- he's one of our younger guys that really kind of brings a good vibe to our football team. He does a little bit more than block; he just really adds a real positive energy, also has done a good job on our punt team, which is a real important role, and it was good to get him back on that front, too. It was really the first thing he started doing when he got back.

Q. How does that positive energy work?

COACH FERENTZ: How do you mean?

Q. How does it come out?

COACH FERENTZ: When you have good players on the field, and more than that, good

players that have a good vibe, it helps your football team. He does his job well, but he also adds a little bit more. Anytime you've got a player that does more than just execute his assignment, that's a good thing.

Q. Does it feel good for you personally that this offense is back to -- the no-huddle is dead and gone, and you guys look more like you guys usually look when you work well?

COACH FERENTZ: The no-huddle really got borne out of the fact that we were down three scores, so it was kind of an obvious choice at that point. And then -- I don't know how much -- I didn't understand the question totally, but I thought overall the offense played well Saturday. We had to be balanced. I felt like we had to be balanced. That was a really tough team to move the ball against. I think we're making some strides right now, and having guys healthy helps, and having guys gives us a chance to be balanced, not that you're going to be balanced every game, but having an opportunity to be balanced is a good thing.

Q. Does your defensive play last week carry over to this week or do you just throw away the playbook since you've got contrasting quarterbacks?

COACH FERENTZ: That was part of what I was trying to say a little bit. They're very different in terms of their offensive approach. The things that make you good defensively, I think for us it starts with everybody being on the same page and really playing to their best of ability because we've had some challenges there from that standpoint and that continues with Dominic being out, so we really have to play well as a group. We don't necessarily have a lot of erasers out there.

If we do that, then I think we can match up whether we're playing an option team or a throwing team or a running team. That's really just everybody kind of being on the same page, and it starts in practice.

Q. Marcus has said that he sat down with you about a month ago where you basically told him stop overanalyzing and just go out and play some football. I wonder, what were you seeing that led you to have that conversation with him, and what have you seen since?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, he just wasn't running decisively. It's about as simple as that.

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And I think sometimes when -- again, he missed a lot of practice, so if you don't practice you don't get enough work, and you don't get confidence if you're not working. Everything starts in practice, I believe that, and so he got the game time, he was probably just overanalyzing, over-reading, those types of things, which is typical of young players. It's not that he's played that much anyway, especially a month ago, career-wise. So it's just kind of, let's get back to basics, and I think every player should try to play to their strengths, and I think he's done a good job of that the last month.

Q. Is there anything to the belief that Michigan State given what happened last year will come out with an added juice, their hair on fire, that sort of thing?

COACH FERENTZ: We actually beat them two years ago in a really tough ballgame right at the end, so if you use that theory, 50 percent of the teams that are playing this weekend are going to be that way. They played really hard last year. They played hard the year before, and we had lost to them in '08, right? We lost to them in '08. They played pretty hard in '09, so I expect these guys to play hard no matter what. In every film you look at they play hard.

Q. If you lose to Michigan State there's no way that Iowa can win the Legends Division. Do you stress that to your team at all this week?

COACH FERENTZ: Not at all. We're really not worried about division standings right now or Big Ten standings. A week ago it didn't look like we were going to a bowl game to a lot of people. We're nine days removed right now from not getting it done on the game field, and that's kind of where we're at as a team right now, so we need just to really try to worry about a good opponent coming in here and see if we can play a good game because that's really what's important for us right now is trying to play well. If we don't play well, it'll be a tough day, I know that. This is a really good team.

Q. What do you think of Cousins compared to last year?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I talked to -- I was just on with the Michigan writers here a few minutes ago, and he's obviously played well throughout his whole career. The two things that

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really impressed me the most about him first of all is when he got in there, he played like he was a veteran player when he wasn't a veteran player, and then this past summer, if anybody was at the Big Ten luncheon, he got up and spoke on behalf of all the student athletes that were there, so you know, close to 2,000 -- I didn't count them but I would imagine close to 2,000 people sitting out there, and the speech he gave, you can understand now why he played that way. He's obviously a very good football player, but my guess is he's just a great leader, not only on the offense but the whole team. He's really an exceptional young guy. I'm just sitting there in the part of the program and thinking about two of the quarterbacks that were there, both he and Dan Persa, and Kirk mentioned in his speech that he got the call from Coach Dantonio a couple weeks into January I believe he said, and he got him, and I don't know what Dan Persa's recruiting story was, but those are two guys that I think could play anywhere in the country for any team in the country, and neither one of them were the five-star recruits that we all know about or read about. It's a good example of what makes college football so neat, and that's a fun thing about it.

Q. On the field what does he do that makes him so effective?

COACH FERENTZ: He's a great leader first and foremost. He moves his offense, and he can really throw it. He runs their offense. That's a big responsibility because they get out of bad plays with the quarterback, and he does a good job.

Q. They've struggled to run the ball this year, at least numbers wise. Is there something you're seeing on film that they could be doing better or that you guys think is one of the reasons they're not getting the yards that some of the other teams are?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, a week ago we watched them run against Michigan and they ran it better than we ran it, so they're a pretty dangerous team. They've got some really good backs, and their line is -- that's probably where they got hit the hardest by graduation. Otherwise they've got a really veteran ball club. That Michigan game they ran it really well, and we know how tough it is to block the Michigan defense. That's more than a full day's work.

Q. They opened the Big Ten against Ohio State, Michigan, Wisconsin, Nebraska,

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and they went 3 and 1. What does that tell you?

COACH FERENTZ: They did pretty well, so that tells me they've got a great team. That's what I was trying to say. If we don't play well this weekend, this is not going to be fun. This is just a really good team.

Q. Can you think of a much more difficult scenario to open the Big Ten season than against something like that?

COACH FERENTZ: You probably could throw something together, but it may take a while to figure it out, that's for sure. Throw the Steelers in there, I guess, right? They're not in our division right now, or our league.

Q. You've got Nardo back. What does that do to your rotation, your depth?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, we get one back and we lose one outside, so we'll just have to keep adjusting. Obviously Dominic will not be with us this week or the rest of the season, so that's out of the equation. The good news is I think everybody else is back with us. Carl Davis was close to being 100 percent last week, but he's barely played. He's still a young guy who's barely played, but at least we'll have someone to practice with so we're not just wearing everybody out, so that's a positive. At least if we can have a good week of practice we'll see what we can throw out there Saturday.

Q. Bigach okay moving to outside?

COACH FERENTZ: He'll have to. The one thing I do know is we can't -- I don't think we can play, whether it be Dominic Alvis or Lebron Daniel, we can't play any of those guys for 90 snaps or 80 snaps in a game, that's just not a good formula, especially against a team like this, a big, physical team like this.

Q. Do you have any story about how you found or how Joe Forgy found you because he's kind of worth his weight in gold right now.

COACH FERENTZ: It's similar to Tom Nardo, I guess, in that I'm not sure why he's here or why he came other than it makes sense because he's from Iowa, up in the Iowa Falls area, but outside of that, he just kind of showed up and started working hard and really did a phenomenal

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job on the scout team last year, he and Collin Sleeper are the two guys that really impressed us. We're going to need him to chip in, too, and I'm sure he'll be ready.

Q. Every senior class seems to have its own kind of personality or its unique story. What's this year's senior class' story?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if we have a story yet. It's kind of weird because we still have three games going into senior day. Usually you only have one left, so we'd be a little further down the road. But this group is -- they've been fun to work with certainly, and it's a mixed bag. You've got guys like Mike Daniels, Tyler Nielsen, Zusevics, Gettis that have played here the last couple years and other guys like Nardo or Bernstein that have jumped in there late, so it's kind of a mixed bag of guys. But they're really a good group, and it's not the biggest class that we've had certainly, but their attitude has really been good, and they've been really good to work with since January.

Q. The Michigan game was kind of a perfect example of the so-called bend-don't-break philosophy. Is that a philosophy you embrace, or is that more the media cooking that up?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, I think the numbers probably bear that out. I'm speaking from a historic standpoint. We got good on special teams early, I'm going back 13 years now, and right along with that, if you don't play well in the red zone on defense, it's going to be tough to win enough games to keep your job. I think that's one thing that we've done a decent job at, and quite frankly, again, a week, nine days ago, 10 days ago, we fell short in that area and paid a price for it. If you're not being productive down in the red zone, be it offense or defense, you're not going to win enough games. That's just the way it goes.

So at least it was good to see that last week but that doesn't mean it'll be good this week. We really need to keep working here.

Q. Were you surprised with the amount of blitzing you guys did or did you have a hand in that on the goal line?

COACH FERENTZ: You have two choices, right? You can pull back or let it rip. Norm was making the call, and I think he just felt good about it. It panned out. If we had given up a touchdown on any one of those plays, which could

have happened on any of them, then we're all dummies. You've got to pull the trigger and make a decision and not worry about what the experts say afterwards. Not that they'd say anything, but you know...

Q. With three games to go, the division is up for grabs. Can you just kind of talk about --

COACH FERENTZ: Back to division. I'm sorry, yeah. I got distracted, I'm sorry.

Q. No worries. Your thoughts on the league as a whole and the division and how competitive it is this first year with divisions.

COACH FERENTZ: It's always been competitive. Now I guess the big -- I'm not the smartest guy in the world, but I've noticed there's twice as much competition if you will or two different things to look at or consider, I suppose. But at the end of the day, I'll predict this: It's probably going to go down to the last week like it pretty much has every year, or maybe next-to-last week. Maybe some things get decided before that. But that's the great thing about conference play and I guess we're going to learn the great thing about divisional play. But at the end of the day, it's good to win, it's bad to lose, and that's really how it is in college football.

Q. You've dealt with external distractions during your time at Iowa --

COACH FERENTZ: Really?

Q. Once or twice. How hard is it to keep a team focused on the game when so much is being said about the program or the school away from the field?

COACH FERENTZ: There are challenges every week. I don't care what the week is, there's going to be a challenge every week. That's just part of it. It's like injuries and how you manage and navigate through challenges. That helps determine success or failure.

Q. Did B.J. get that cast off -- is it a cast?

COACH FERENTZ: No, we're going to have that on all -- the regular season, it'll come off hopefully at the end of this month here. He got that checked last week, and they just want to be cautious, which I'm on board.

Q. Is Marcus going to carry it another 100 times over the next few weeks or --

COACH FERENTZ: It's possible. We're going to try to get somebody else in the game, but sometimes I need a push, I guess. It's one of those deals. Finding that good time is really -- I can see that being really tough here the next three weeks, but we're trying to get there.

Q. Has he maybe demonstrated that he is one of those backs that gets stronger in the fourth quarter?

COACH FERENTZ: So far, so good, and good backs do that and good running teams do that. I'm not saying we're that, either or, but that's how it works. But that being said, if we could get him a little rest during the game it wouldn't hurt him. It really wouldn't hurt. We've got to get there somehow.

Q. As you move along and have a chance maybe to redshirt Mika'il, does it become a more difficult decision at all?

COACH FERENTZ: No not at all. We're playing to win right now. The decision has been made.

Q. How is he coming along?

COACH FERENTZ: He's doing good. The problem last week was not Mika'il, it was the head coach; the head coach needs a push, so I'm working on it.

Q. Do you need somebody, Ken, to tell you?

COACH FERENTZ: No, we said it during the week, I said it during the week, and then I guess I must have changed my mind. But it has nothing to do with Mika'il or anybody else, it's just me, I've got to get over it and we've got to go. He's a good player.

Q. What does it say about Marcus, how reliable he is, especially after the first game of the year?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it seemed like there was a little panic out there after that first game. But I just looked at it, I think all of us looked at it, that had been watching what was going on. He didn't practice enough during August to be ready, and when guys don't practice enough any time of the year, it's really hard to perform. I'm going back to -- I'm dating myself here a little bit,

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but I've got a clipping somewhere in one of my files in my rat's nest that the Steelers lost to the Jets in like 1974 or something like that, but anyway, they had a couple guys tried to play without -- these are the best players in the world, and if you can't practice enough, then it's really hard to think that you're going to be able to perform at a good level.

I think we were all confident that Marcus was a good player and is going to be good, but we just had to work through an issue, and it got more complicated when Mika'il broke his leg in the first game. What we thought was a good plan in August and kind of fell apart real quick. So he worked through that, and I think at least now we have a chance maybe to be a little bit better than we were back then.

Q. Where are you at with Nolan MacMillan, and I noticed that Jim Poggi finally dressed on Saturday. How are they coming along?

COACH FERENTZ: Jim has practiced two weeks. Two full weeks he was actually the look team player of the week, the look team guy of the week defensively for the game two weeks ago. So he's back with us now, and he's doing well. He had a couple ups and downs, but that's part of coming back from an injury, so he's back with us. Nolan is maybe working 50 percent, something like that, but it's increasing incrementally, so right now, until he's back, he's got a lot of ground to cover just like Brad did, but at least the arrow is going the right direction right now.

Q. Do you see either of them participating at all this year?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, Jimmy might have a chance, but I think Nolan right now, we've got, what, less than three weeks left, so that's probably not now, but maybe the bowl game, we'll see.

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