

October 9, 2007



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: I'll start out, quickly. The captains, will be Bryan Mattison and Mike Humpal on defense, Albert Young offense, and Tom Busch on offense/special teams. He's been doing a good job all year for us.

Injury-wise I told you Saturday I'd know a little bit more about Dace Richardson's situation, and unfortunately his knee is going to require surgery. So we're probably looking at a procedure being done somewhere here in the next week to two weeks.

He's looking at a pretty extensive recovery there, so it's unfortunate, and it's just part of the deal. You hate to see anybody have to go through surgery.

Then more immediately, Mike Klinkenborg and Devan Moylan are probably the two guys who remain in question about their availability this week. We don't anticipate either guy practicing today. I think realistically you're looking at a long shot for this week, and hopefully we'll get them back soon.

That being said, we're playing an excellent football team in Illinois. Obviously they're having a very successful year. I don't think it comes as a major surprise. If you're paying attention, this is a ball club that had a lot of veteran guys a year ago when we played them, and many of those guys are back from last season, so I guess my point is there a lot of these guys have two years' experience.

The other thing they've done is they've done a nice job of bringing younger players along. Last year, they played a freshman quarterback, true freshman quarterback. They paid for it a little bit in terms of turnovers and what have you, but it's paying off for them now. He's doing an excellent job of directing their offense.

And then they've added a guy or two. Most notably their receiver has done a great job of giving them some juice on both offense and special teams. So you're looking at a team that's

got a lot of veteran players who have played very, very well. They've got a good mix of young guys in there helping them out, supplementing them, and I think that's showing up on their special teams. They are good on special teams; they're specialists.

They're doing a good job and they're playing very good. It's not a fluke that they're 3-0 in the league or that they've won five straight. They're playing very well. They've got a lot of momentum going right now and it's going to be a great challenge for our football team, so we've got that task ahead of us.

And then most immediately for us certainly is our improvement. We've got a lot of work to do there, and we'll continue that work today.

Q. I wonder if we could get a little more detail on specifically what's wrong with Dace's knee, and if he's going to be off the rest of the year?

COACH FERENTZ: It's not -- I'm not a doctor or a medical expert, but it's not an ACL repair, it's a little bit more extensive. It involves his cartilage and some structural concerns in there. The procedure that was done this summer was an attempt to get him through the season, and really it just wasn't successful. It's just based on a structure right now, so they're going to have to do some things to alter that and get him through. It's not the same thing as what Mike Humpal went through a couple years ago but maybe conceptually a little bit. It's an extensive rehab, and it's unfortunate.

Q. Will he maybe play spring ball?

COACH FERENTZ: Absolutely not. You're looking at a minimum of six months to just have normal function and I think optimistically if he can be back full speed in the summer program next year, that would be good. I make that parallel in Mike's case. His first year back he'd work for two days, have to take a day off. I'm not saying that's going to happen with Dace, but it's a possibility. It's a possibility that this thing doesn't work out where he can play at the position he's in.

Q. What are his odds of getting a

medical?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, I think very good. He only played three games. Fourth would have been this past Saturday if I'm not mistaken, so he'll definitely qualify.

Q. Do you have an update on Tony Moeaki?

COACH FERENTZ: I think at best probably two weeks, and that's if all goes well and according to plan, which sometimes they don't. He's coming off a significant injury. His hand is probably the least of his worries right now. The elbow dislocation is a tough thing to come back from, especially at a position like his where he's got to do some things outside of just blocking, so it's a tough injury.

Q. Do you have an update on Rob Bruggeman?

COACH FERENTZ: He's closer certainly, and I think he's starting to work a little bit individually with our guys, so maybe next week he will start working with the team on a team activity. But you're talking about a guy, again, who has missed an awful lot of time, so to get him back in the swing of things you're probably looking at a matter of weeks.

Q. Would he have started?

COACH FERENTZ: He's practicing well. I don't know if he would have been a starter yet. I think it's fair to say he was certainly in our top seven, six or seven, prior to his injury. He would have been in the derby, that's for sure. You're just never sure how it's going to pan out.

Q. Justifiably as it seems like the injuries are taking their toll, do you feel down about your situation?

COACH FERENTZ: Some years are better than others. When it comes to injuries, there's absolutely no way to predict those things. When they occur, you just deal with them the best you can. To say they don't impact a football team or affect a team's performance, that would be a little bit naïve, but again, they're part of the game. You take the good with the bad.

It's like anything else. We've had years where we've sailed through pretty clean and we've had other years where it's been a little bit more challenging. It just makes the equation a little bit tougher to solve, but we'll keep working on it. Nobody is going to be down about it or dwell on it.

Q. Could what Coach Zook has done at Illinois be held up as sort of a blueprint for the one or two Hawk fans that appear to be near the ledge as to what can happen?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know. I think we're just trying to follow the blueprint we've been using. It worked pretty well in the past. I don't think there's anything wrong with our blueprint, it's just a matter of us -- they've done a great job, Purdue has gone a great job. They're another excellent ball club.

I think we'll probably see a lot of parallels a week from now, but without researching it, which I haven't done, but I think -- in the out-of-season looking at Purdue, I looked at Purdue and Illinois being very similar, a lot of veteran players back, taking their lumps maybe a couple years ago, but they've got a lot of experienced guys playing well, and the results are showing right now. They're playing real well, too. I thought those two teams were a lot alike in a lot of areas.

Where we're at right now is not where we wanted to be certainly. It wasn't by design. But nobody is panicking here, and I don't think anybody in our house is at least on the ledge, I hope not. We're just going to work through it.

Q. When you took a look at the Penn State film did you see any improvement?

COACH FERENTZ: Not really, no, I wish I could tell you I did. I thought we played a pretty good football game for 27 minutes and then things fell apart for us. Had we gotten into the locker room 3-0, that was the goal at that point, certainly from where we stood. They had the ball with three minutes left, and who knows what would have happened. I don't know if it would have been any different or not. But the last three minutes of that first half sure changed the complexion of things.

The second half when you get involved in those situations, which unfortunately I've been in a few of them, especially offensively when you're behind, we're not exactly clicking on all cylinders right now anyway, you get behind like that and the field really tilts. It's a tough situation for a young group of guys to go through.

To me what happened in that fourth quarter, you could see it happen. But again, there were some sparks there, and we're big into sparks right now. Anything we can see that is positive is good, and we'll try to build off that experience and be better this week.

Q. They've gotten a lot of option off of their spread offense. That's kind of unique.

How do you defend that?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, they are more of an option team than anything else. If you're going to start anywhere, I think that's how you describe them. They've got a big strong guy running the ball, running the offense back there, and they've got an excellent running back in Mendenhall. Those two things alone, two pretty good weapons. They've got a veteran offensive line that's playing well, and their receivers do a good job of blocking. They're good in the passing game, too, but they do a nice job blocking.

They pose problems for everybody. They really run the ball well. They're a good run team and conversely they're a good defensive football team on the other side. They were doing a good job of that last year. Very few teams ran the ball well against them a year ago. They're a tough match-up.

Q. Does it go without saying that the injuries are the main reason the team has struggled so much offensively?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, if you look at our depth chart from August 1st until now it's certainly different. I can't sit here today and say that it really would have been great had we had everybody. I think common sense will tell you it would have been a little bit easier. We saw some signs of things coming together earlier in the season. But you play the cards that are dealt, and we don't have as much experience as we'd like in certain spots. But the flipside is they're gaining some great experience in tough situations.

And as I've said, many times young players tend to improve quicker, so that's the challenge that's ahead for us right now. We've got six games left, so there's a lot out there for us to get accomplished potentially, and what we need to do is just start with this week. We've got to have a great week this week.

Q. Have you seen progress with the team over the last two weeks?

COACH FERENTZ: Up and down, you know, up and down. Like I said, I thought for the first 27 minutes the other day we were playing pretty well. You know, had a real unfortunate series of plays there, and unfortunately a couple of them came on 3rd down, I think three of them came on 3rd down situations, so we weren't able to get over that hump. The complexion of the game changed pretty rapidly at that stage, but we're doing some good things. I don't think it's as bleak as it may appear. But that being said, we've got a lot to work on.

Q. Can this turn into a rebuilding year?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I'm not big on that term at any time of the year, be it August, June, July or certainly right now. We're just going to deal with what's in front of us this week.

We'll take the players that are going to practice today and this week and try our best to get them ready to go. Our objective is to win the game this Saturday. That's what we're looking for. That's our goal.

Q. When you have a spread option offense like that with such an effective runner at quarterback, what is the key to defending it?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, everybody has to be on the right page first and foremost. Everybody has got a responsibility certainly. Two guys are going to take the quarterback and ignore Mendenhall or vice versa, that type of thing. It's like any offense that you play; everybody has got a role to play. They've got to get the job done.

And you don't have the luxury of loading up because these guys can throw the ball around, also. We're just going to have to play good team defense again. That really doesn't change, it's just a different attack than what we've seen recently at least.

Q. On Saturday did you see the twos or threes, or I don't know how deep you went, but have you seen the reserves continue that this week?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, and we've seen it in practice. They're a young group right now. Chad Geary and Anton Narinskiy are the most experienced guys or oldest guys in the group, although Chad is a little bit newer to the position. And Anton moved in the spring. But you throw in the mix there Ballard is a young guy certainly, Clayborn is a young guy, but they continue to improve in practice. And we've seen them do some good things the last couple weeks on the game film, seen them do some things that need to be corrected, too, but they're making progress. We'll keep bringing them on as long as they keep practicing well, which we anticipate them doing.

Q. Talk about Mendenhall. What makes him so good?

COACH FERENTZ: He's just a good running back, but he's a big, strong guy, as is Ben. You talk about two guys who are big and physical for the position. But he was an excellent player out of high school and just has continued to mature.

He's about what you thought he would have been. He's really doing a good job there.

And then running the option, too, it's created some seams for him, and he's doing a good job with it.

Q. When you heard that Coach Zook took the job at Illinois did you anticipate that he'd be able to sort of turn this thing around as quickly as he has?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, I don't put a timetable on what we're doing or anyone else, but I'm not surprised. Illinois is a good job, and they had some very good success certainly, in recent memory. It's a state with great population, good high school football, so to me it's always been a good job and a place where they have a great potential to win. And Coach Zook is a good coach, he's got a good staff, they're doing a good job, so I'm not surprised at all.

Last year you could just see it. We played them early and it was our first Big Ten game, and it was a tough, competitive ballgame, but certainly I follow what's going on in the league every week, and just the way their season went. We were impressed with them when we played them, and then it looked like they continued to grow. They had a lot of tough, close ball games. They're making good progress.

Q. Recruiting wise in the last couple years, does that make it a little more difficult for you guys given you're border states and maybe cover a lot of the same?

COACH FERENTZ: I think first and foremost everybody tries to recruit their own state as hard as they can, and with their population base it makes perfect sense to do that, and they've done a good job. They've worked hard in Illinois and other places, too. But they've done a good job, and it's hard to find a school that doesn't recruit in Chicago. I mean, it really is. Two springs ago I think I ran into I guess it was Pete Carroll's son there for SC. Just about everybody is coming in there now and trying to get involved.

Q. Is it coincidental that Illinois has kind of risen in the last couple years and you guys have fallen off?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if it's a coincidence at all. Purdue is on the up -- it's football. We talked about that. I think if you study our conference, anybody has got an opportunity. Since '81 basically everybody has had opportunities to win. 13 years prior to that it was kind of a closed case, but since that time

everybody has for the most part been in contention, had an opportunity to be in contention, and that's what everybody is trying to do.

Q. Is there any one thing that makes it more difficult to stay competitive? Is it practice time or is it scholarship limitations or a little bit of everything?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if it's anything in particular, it's just a tough conference. We've got a conference with good coaches, good players, good teams and good institutions, so from a recruiting standpoint, I think all of us have good products to sell. You know, so it's a tough league. But it's been that way since '81.

I don't know if there's any dramatic change that I've noticed, at least in my time, nine years, but I looked at it from afar. The '90s didn't look a lot different to me from what's going on now, or the '80s.

Q. In terms of the offense did you see anything in the fourth quarter that maybe you didn't see in the first three quarters?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we protected and completed passes and then a couple times ran with the ball, too, after a completion.

It's amazing, but our execution was just cleaner. There were a significant amount of plays in the Indiana game that were very positive, too. But when you have the negative ones, it just really makes it difficult, especially the stage we're at right now. We can't endure negative yards, plays, be it sacks, penalties, things of that nature. You've got to have an experienced ball club to do that. We've got to start by not hurting ourselves. But yeah, we need to make some completions and we need to run the ball a little bit more effectively.

Q. Is the defense doing the job for the most part, just a matter of them wearing out being on the field too much?

COACH FERENTZ: That was my thought. I thought last week for 27 minutes we were playing extremely well. We had some near misses and what have you. But I think they're doing a good job. We've got the potential to have a very good defense, and we've played very good defense a fair amount of the time this year. But to get them off the field would certainly help.

That helps any defense. Usually when you look at teams that have great defensive stats, that's part of the equation. They're not out there more than half the time, so that's a helpful thing to do.

Q. What are your thoughts on J Leman just looking at him on film?

COACH FERENTZ: Oh, good player. He was very good last year, too, very productive for them. In their scheme, like most teams, middle linebacker is a critical position. But he's doing a great job. Veteran player, a lot of experience, and again, I don't pretend to know him, but on film he plays like an old linebacker. He's got personality, he's very aggressive, very enthusiastic in his play, made a huge play against Penn State you remember two weeks ago. Really you could say it was the game saver. That's not an easy play; that's a heck of a job by a guy. That's a tough match-up for a middle linebacker, yet he's very good against the run, so he's a very good player.

Q. With as many young guys as you have on offense and the struggles they've had over the last few weeks, do you begin to become concerned that maybe confidence is an issue?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think any time you're not having the kind of success you'd like to have you worry about. But not to the point of being Dr. Phil, either. I mean, part of the game is perseverance and pushing through and working to improve. The best way to get confidence is to have success, and there's really no easy path there, you just keep working.

Q. How much would a win help your confidence this week?

COACH FERENTZ: It would help immensely. It would help any team that has lost a couple games in a row. But at the same point, I don't think anybody is going to jump in the river if it goes the other way. We just need to worry about playing hard and improving.

Q. Have you become a victim of your own success in some ways?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know. Explain that to me. I'm not real good on these questions.

Q. You guys were very successful the first -- in the middle years there, and now the expectations have risen. Would people be grumbling as much now if you hadn't done as well three or four years ago?

COACH FERENTZ: About the only place I go is my house and the office. I haven't been exposed to all the grumbling. I've read about grumbling, but whatever happens is what happens. We're not doing well right now so I won't expect

people to be applauding. That's not how it works. And when you win people are a little bit happier, including us. You take the good with the bad and you try to work through it, just like you always have.

I don't feel like a victim right now, though. The connotation of that word, I'm not there yet I don't think.

Q. What's holding up Mike and Devan at this point?

COACH FERENTZ: They just haven't cleared up. Devan's is more of a groin issue. You can't predict how muscles are going to react.

And then Mike just has -- looked like he was coming on at the end of the week last week. I think I said that Saturday, we were optimistic, and then Sunday he was having some headaches again. Certainly nobody is going to fool around in that area. So we're just going to be prudent and take our time and hopefully this week will be better than last week. It just makes you wonder a little bit.

Q. Last week Mike flew himself out there to be on the sidelines. Can you talk about what that says about him and how he is?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's not surprising because that is how Mike is. Those of us that know him, extremely committed. He's been a great team member, outstanding young man and a great student, too, on top of it. And guys that didn't do that, obviously it's no reflection on them. But that's just Mike. He wanted to be there with the ball club.

We've kind of got a policy of not traveling guys who can't play, but we did leave a spot open so he got himself out there and that enabled him to be on the sideline with the guys. He ended up being our 70th player. I can't say enough about him. He's a great young man and a good football player, too.

Q. Tough to travel there, too. It's hard to get out there.

COACH FERENTZ: I guess. I don't know the details on that one, but there he was. That's a good deal.

Q. Just being at the halfway point, what grade would you give this team just given everything that you've seen with them, with their practice, with their games?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't mean to be smart, but I haven't given a grade. It was '78 I

guess it was the last time I was teaching. That reminds me of a story, but I'll leave that one go for now. We're 2 and 4 right now, and we're looking forward to this week. There's six weeks left. It's pretty simple.

What we're working on right now is trying to do our best to play well Saturday and win a football game. We want to win a Big Ten football game. We want to get back on the winning side and walk in the locker room and see everybody smiling. That's what we want. It's not going to come easy, but is it impossible, certainly not. We just have to play better and play harder, and I'm confident eventually we're going to get there.

Q. Moylan, you said it's a groin injury?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's got a strain there. He's been cleared there for probably two weeks now.

Q. You're pretty specific on these injuries.

COACH FERENTZ: Do you guys have medical backgrounds or what?

Q. Talk about Clayborn getting more comfortable?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it's his first game playing, so hopefully it'll be like anybody else. Hopefully experience is good experience. He did a lot of good things out there Saturday. He blew a couple things like most guys would in their first game. But he brings a lot of positive attributes, and I'm confident he'll just keep climbing the ladder.

Q. Charles Godfrey leads in Big Ten interceptions. Is he playing that well or is it one of those chance things?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's playing well, and you hope he would be. For a team to have success you need your most experienced guys, certainly your seniors but all your most experienced guys to play well. I think we're getting that for the most part. But he's been opportunistic, he's doing a good job, made some nice plays, a nice break the other day to pick that one off.

That's one of the ironic things going on right now, big focus was turnover margin. We're doing a heck of a job but don't have anything to show for it. That's like a lot of things; at the end of the day when things aren't going right, if you're doing the right things right, sooner or later it's going to translate into wins and losses. I've always believed that, always will, so turnover margin sooner or later, you would think based on what

we've done so far we'd be a lot more successful. But it's still a good thing, and we're really pleased about it.

Q. I think that was 20 points off 13 turnovers. Does it get to a point where you --

COACH FERENTZ: If that's the rest of the equation, yeah, sure.

Q. Do you say to the offense, we've got to do something --

COACH FERENTZ: We said that about four months ago. You say that every time. That's the big thing about turnovers, especially when you get them in good field position, be it field position off a turnover, kicking game, which we've had both, we just haven't been able to muster points off those opportunities.

Yeah, good teams do that. Certainly good teams do that. They do it with good field position. The good news, the other day, our drive was 83 or 87 yards, whatever it might have been, a substantial drive, that was good. But when you get the ball, we had the ball -- gained good field position early in the game and came away 0-0, so that's not a positive.

Q. You've talked several times about how you like this team. Do you feel like the personality of this team is a big reason why you feel like things can turn?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think if you're attitude is good, that's one of those fundamentals, too, just like turnover margin, I think everything starts with attitude. If your attitude is positive and good, your work ethic coincides with your attitude, then I think, yeah, I gave an opportunity to improve and have good things happen to you, so I'm definitely encouraged there.

Q. Not to beat a dead horse, but what would you say is the major reason for the offense?

COACH FERENTZ: I think you're trying to get me to say it's injuries. I think that's where we're going here. Things just haven't come together the way we hoped at this point. We'd like to be further along. I think everybody on our team wishes that were the case, but it's not. Based on my life experiences, you just keep working.

Q. I'll read between the lines.

COACH FERENTZ: That's about as good as I'll get right there.

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