

October 14, 2008



An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome. I'll start off with injuries real quickly. Not a lot to report, other than it looks like Troy Johnson probably won't make it. He's got a muscle strain, that's probably going to keep him out. And then Tony Moeaki, that's the under; it's probably not the right way to say it. But anyway, I don't think his chances are great. We'll see what this week brings. But other than that we'll be okay.

Captains will be the same four guys as we've had the last couple weeks, Rob Bruggeman, Shonn Greene, Mitch King and Matt Kroul. Those guys are doing a great job certainly.

I'll just deviate for one second and just reclarify. I mentioned last week about the assistant coaches being interviewed and what have you, and just so everybody is clear on it, if anybody has any angst or problems with it, don't be mad at our assistant coaches. That's my policy, okay?

I'll give you an explanation on how I do things. First and foremost, when I hire a coach, the number one thing I'm looking for are good people; secondly, guys that are good teachers; thirdly, and it kind of goes along with teaching, I think we want people that really do a nice job with young people and care about young people and really are coaching for those reasons, looking out for the best interest of their players.

And not at all on my criteria list is media savvy. I just don't even rank that. But that being said, Norm and Ken would do a far better job at these Tuesdays with the media outings than I would. I promise you'd enjoy those guys a lot more. And I think that's probably true of most of our staff.

Anyway, that's kind of shaped the way I was raised, I guess. I got into coaching because I really loved coaching. I love the people I work with, and that's why I do it.

I didn't get into coaching to be interviewed, to go to press conferences, and that's just it. So

the way I look at it is it's not part of the job requirement for our assistant coaches. I'll never make it part of the job requirement for them. I'm a lot more interested in them doing their jobs, and that is a part of the job requirement, and that's where I want their focus and energy to go.

I understand how important it is to have media relations. I think I try to do my best, and I understand it's important. So I'm not saying that. But for assistant coaches, it's way down my list. I want our guys to be invested in their players and at this time of year really invested on getting our team ready to perform as well as possible Saturday.

My vision is not real wide. That's just kind of how I look at the world.

The other thing, too, I'll just throw this out there, and I don't mean it in a disrespectful way, but I've always -- how do I say this? Just coaches work really hard, I'll put it that way. Our coaches' work, particularly Sunday through Thursday night, is extensive. There aren't a lot of breaks, there's not much family time, so that's that. I've never complained about that, and I've never talked about hours that I work or anybody else works because I fully realize there are a lot of people that work two jobs to provide for their families, put their kids through school. In our state, I'll tell you, nobody works harder than farmers. When it's time to go, it's time to go.

I've always kind of been cautious of coaches that talk about how hard they work. But the reality is Sunday through Thursday night is pretty extensive, and again, as a head coach my feelings are what coaches ought to be doing is worrying about the game plan, our players, getting them ready. If they've got time to see their families at all, that's great. So why would they take 15 minutes to do an interview? If they want to do that, that's fine.

I hope you can appreciate that. That's kind of how it looks. I wouldn't do five, either, if I was an assistant, but I'm here because I'm not an assistant. So anyway, here I am. That's how I look at the world. Anyway, it gives me something to talk about at least. That's good.

Now, Wisconsin. Obviously we've got a big challenge this week. That's really what's important. We're playing a very good football

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team. They're very talented. They're coming off a tough portion of their schedule, but don't let what's happened the last couple weeks fool you. This is an excellent team coming in. They're very strong, very veteran, and they're very physical, and they've got some very good players and they're well coached.

We've got a challenge ahead for us, and the challenge for us right now is to maximize our time, including our assistants maximizing their time, and hopefully we'll be ready to go on Saturday. It will be good to be back in Kinnick and we're looking forward to it. It ought to be a real good Big Ten football game.

Q. Reviewing Indiana, this obviously is the best game the team has played to date?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, in a lot of ways. The thing we talked about obviously was taking care of the football. We hadn't done a good job of taking care of the football and it made a world of difference Saturday. I'm really happy. Our players have been playing hard each and every week. They've been competing hard, and we had to Saturday. I think that score was not representative of the kind of game it was I don't think.

Just hopefully we've learned a little bit about the value of taking better care of the ball. We did a better job of it a year ago. And if we can do that, that'll certainly help us. But it was a positive step for us, and it was great to win. We needed a win.

Q. Is Tony done for the year?

COACH FERENTZ: I hope not. There's a chance he could make it Saturday, but I'm not optimistic. We'll see. Just because it's a muscle, and if we're not smart, then he could be done for the year. We're going to be cautious. If it's close at all, we'll hold him back just so we don't lose him for the year. The good thing is we've got a bye week coming up. I mean, he's close right now, so I'd like to think here in another seven days we'll be ready to go and then we can rest him further.

Q. How about Clayborn and Shonn's ankles?

COACH FERENTZ: They should be fine.

Q. Mike Daniel?

COACH FERENTZ: He's fine. They ran some more tests this morning, but there's nothing dangerous, no red alerts, just making sure that there is nothing else. He was fine coming home, some kind of a breathing -- shortness of breath.

They ruled out asthma, ruled out a lot of things. Maybe they can find something today.

Q. Scary, wasn't it?

COACH FERENTZ: It was, yeah. It was just strange because he's been through camp, he's played in hotter games and played -- he's played this year. It was strange in that regard. The weather was a little bit unseasonable; maybe that was part of it. Maybe he was all excited because we won, I don't know. I'm only making jokes about it because he's fine. As far as I know, he's fine. But it was scary. Anytime a player goes down, you worry about that.

Q. What about Paki?

COACH FERENTZ: He's fine. He could have played Saturday. Just given the situation, we just felt like it was better to get him one more week of rest, so he should be full speed now.

Q. Did last week's performance reinforce the notion that things were moving in the right direction despite those three losses, especially with the players?

COACH FERENTZ: I think our players and probably coaches have been more realistic than people outside the program. I think we see the film every week, we watch our guys practice, and I said a week ago, I wasn't discouraged at all with our football team. I was disappointed, but all of us were.

It gets down to -- in conference play, when you're in competitive play, it gets down to the things that gets you beat, turnovers, special teams, penalties. It's very cliché, but most clichés are pretty true, and certainly true in football.

Q. Ryan Donahue's numbers have dropped quite a bit, probably happily so for your case. He's down to second lowest number of punts in the Big Ten. Is that something that you're aware of?

COACH FERENTZ: No, but we're moving the ball better than we were a year ago. I was painfully aware of the fact that we punted a lot last year. And punts aren't a bad thing. This could be a game where punting is not a dirty word.

That being said, he's performing really well. We thought he really matured and developed last year. And you bring up that topic, one thing I hope, whenever -- it's early in the game and all that, but when you evaluate players, statistics are usually part of the equation, but to really appreciate a good punter, you have to watch him

punt, and he's done some great things. I have no idea what his net punting is, but I know he's done a great job of putting the ball down where we have a chance to get field position, getting hang time. He hasn't been perfect but he's been fairly consistent.

And when you have a good punter, that gives you a chance to have an edge in the kicking game a little bit.

Q. Is the key to slowing down Wisconsin putting guys in the box and slowing the run game?

COACH FERENTZ: Choose your poison because you start with Beckum in the passing game. I don't know if we've defended him very well career-wise, nor have many other people. The guy is really an excellent football player there. Gilreath is a great speed player and a big-time player. Jefferson has got good size, he can run. So they've got guys that can hurt you in the passing game. It gets down to playing good team defense once again because obviously these guys are very strong, very experienced, very big up front, and both of their running backs can probably be playing center or guard if they played for us, they're so big. I don't know if our guys are that strong. But Clay and Hill are both big, big strong guys.

Q. Getting back to your defense again, Iowa has slowed some of the nation's top running backs this season?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, our guys are playing good defense right now, and it's going to be a heck of a challenge again. Going back to the Pittsburgh game, we've seen pretty good running backs each and every week. Thigpen was a little bit different last week because he had great speed, but when you go through Sutton, Ringer, McCoy, those three guys are excellent, and now we're seeing two more guys. Zach Brown is a good back, also, so they've got three guys that are very dangerous. We haven't seen a line quite like this one. Maybe we can get the police to arrest them for violating weight quotas or whatever coming across the border. But these guys are big, and they're good.

Q. Surprised to see that score last week, Penn State 48, Wisconsin 7?

COACH FERENTZ: Phil and I were just talking about that a little while ago. You get into games, sometimes things happen. It happens to good football teams, too. It's just that's part of the deal. And then the other part of the equation is Penn State has done that to a lot of pretty good

football teams this year, and they're probably going to do it to some more. They're playing extremely well right now, they're extremely veteran and they are playing like a veteran team. Probably the only guy that's not a veteran for them is Clark that's doing a great job, and he looks like he's been playing for three years. So it's a scary outfit. To judge a team against Penn State right now is probably not a fair evaluator.

Q. Is this about as healthy as you've had a team at this point?

COACH FERENTZ: I'd rather not talk about that, with all due respect. I'm not trying to be anti-media here and non-media friendly, but it is. And that's part of success, too. Things can change fast when a couple guys -- wrong guys get hurt. Knock on wood, we've been lucky there so far for the most part.

Q. On paper Mitch King, Matt Kroul, big tackles really shouldn't work, should it? 275-pound guys?

COACH FERENTZ: That's just how we play. They've worked extremely hard in a couple areas, strength and conditioning a fair amount. And then they understand technique. They really understand it, and they work at it. Technique is something that can fade. It's like hitting a baseball or shooting a basketball. I mean, you've got to work at it and practice it routinely. They're very well-coached. We've had great line coaching from Rick and Ron Aiken, also, but that's kind of the way we are.

I mean, we tend to be a smaller group up front; both sides of the football historically has been that way. If you compare us size-wise to other teams around the Big Ten, either line, usually we're somewhere in the middle or in the bottom. That's just how we've played.

Q. Something you look for in those guys?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, there are a couple things we look for. They're good football players. It starts with that. Both Matt and Mitch were tough, productive players in high school. I don't think we were sure in either case what they would be. Matt is probably a little bit more like Mike Elgin. We weren't sure what Mike Elgin would be, but we thought he'd be something. Mitch we thought would be a linebacker. We thought that even in the spring of 2005.

But it got a little tough to watch our front. We just weren't good up there, so we approached

him about moving, and Matt has really taken off and done a good job with it.

Q. Are you ever even surprised by what they're able to do against the 330-pounders in the world?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I go back to Jonathan Babineaux -- I'll interject this. I have a snapshot moment of one time I saw Jonathan get physically knocked off the football, and it was at Arizona State during that massacre game. I mean, I got a snapshot. Watching the tape the next day, I was like, whoa, and it was because Jonathan abandoned his technique. It was later in the game and there were some circumstances there probably.

But for the most part Jonathan was just wired into what he was supposed to do, and despite his size, it was tough to move him. So that's the key to our defense is everybody playing their position, playing it well, and those two guys are like the poster children for that, that mantra.

Q. When did you get a good feeling about this offensive line?

COACH FERENTZ: Oh, in camp probably. I think we started -- it was going slow, progress was slow in the spring. But I think in camp things started to pick up a little bit, and they've been working hard. I wouldn't minimize -- a guy like Bruggeman, who we all took him for granted in one sense because -- main game was his first ballgame plan. We just all looked at him as like a third-year guy, but with the knee injury, that kind of knocked him out of last year -- not kind of, it did, it knocked him out last year. But he's got the maturity of a fifth-year guy and some very quiet leadership capabilities or attributes that are very important.

It starts with him a little bit, and Seth. Those two guys -- Seth didn't have a good spring. That hurt us. He was out most of the spring.

Anyway, we've been pretty healthy for the most part. It started at camp, and competition has been good. It's still pretty good. We still have some guys battling for playing time, and you get guys -- they've got some guys that are improving right now behind the scenes that are backup, so I think those guys are moving in the right direction. They're doing a good job. A lot of that is maturation, though.

Q. What would be Bruggeman's strength, is it footwork?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's a good football player. He's a 335-, 340-pound guy out of

Wash High five years ago who's worked extremely hard, and he's gotten his body now where he's given himself a chance to compete against good players. But he's got a great attitude. He's a very smart person and he's a very smart player, too.

He's pretty wired, kind of like the discussion with Matt and Mitch. He's wired in with technique, which you have to be if you're going to compete at that weight. Chris Doyle was talking about Steinie last night playing; looks like he's about 265 Chris thought. But he's athletic, he's tough, he's smart, and he understands leverage. Those attributes are more important than size, I think.

Q. Is this his true last year? Is it possible to apply for a sixth year?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think so, because I think you typically have to have two season-ending injuries, and I don't think that's the case. He'll get a chance to play somewhere next year. Hopefully it'll work out for him.

Q. To what would you attribute the closeness of this rivalry? I read going back many years, I think it's the closest series in the history of the Big Ten, but in the last three or four years I think 17 points separated the last three or four games?

COACH FERENTZ: It's a little bit reminiscent -- when I was here in the '80s, seemed like when we played Michigan State it was always a four-quarter ballgame, 59-plus, just would always go down to the last minute. For whatever reason, I can't explain why that was, but that's how it worked.

We were probably similar problems, too, in that time frame. We looked forward to playing Wisconsin in the '80s. At the end of the '80s, not early in the '80s, but things tailed off there a little bit. But when Barry went there that all changed. He's done a great job and Bret has done a great job of keeping that program running, maybe even taking it higher. They've really had it going. They've done a nice job. It's been a competitive series. It's been fun to be involved in the game, most of the time.

Q. Does familiarity play any role in that?

COACH FERENTZ: Perhaps, yeah, perhaps. Coaching-wise, you mean?

Q. You know what they want to do and they know what you want to do.

COACH FERENTZ: Perhaps, but you can build that argument with anybody in our conference probably, so I don't know.

Q. Do you think Shonn Greene ought to be in the Heisman Trophy discussions?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not worldly enough to talk about that. I just know he's playing pretty well for Iowa, I know that, and I'm happy about that. I don't know where he ranks with everybody else, but he's playing pretty well -- not pretty well, very well.

Q. Given the performance you got from Jewel Hampton on Saturday, how much easier is it for you to run your offense when you can have a second back like him as well as Shonn Greene to go to?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it was great to see and it was important to see because Paki has been nicked up here the last couple weeks. So our next-man-in list is getting a little shorter. But we've seen him grow every week. He's done a nice job on special teams, he's practicing well. He really doesn't act like a first-year guy except when he's trying to put the ball out there. That's a little scary.

But other than that, that's an aggressive mistake, but he's gaining ground and that was very valuable for him the other day, to play against good competition. He did a good job.

But I go back to -- he ran a play in front of Northwestern's bench that was as good a run and as an important run for him. It was a tough run, he made like seven yards I think it was. So we're seeing him grow every week, so that's good, because you like to have a couple guys ready. I think Paki is back with us, too, so that's encouraging.

Q. Improvement is such a subjective term. Typically your good teams have improved week by week throughout the season. Are you seeing that?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we have been every week, outside of the turnovers. That's been disheartening. But outside of that, no, I think this team has been improving weekly. That's what I was referring to last week when I said they've really been a fun team to be around. Part of being a fun team is practicing the way you're supposed to practice, and coming to the field focused, prepared and energetic. These guys have done that. They've really done a nice job.

Sometimes it doesn't always show up in your record, which right now we're a .500 ball club.

But you know, it's how you work at it, and hopefully in time, you know, it shows up.

Q. One of the guys that got knocked out from last year's game was Andy Brodell. Talk a little bit about the season he's having and the comeback he's had from that injury.

COACH FERENTZ: Sure can. It's been a long, hard road. I don't think people, again -- why would you, but just the length of time it took him to rehab and get back. I'm not sure if he's still full strength. I think he's pretty close if he's not. But he wasn't in the spring and he wasn't in camp. He's been progressively working at it, and he's been very proactive. He's healed right now, but he's proactive to keep it that way.

That's the first experience I've ever had with an injury like that where they've had to surgically repair a muscle tear. It's every bit as tough as coming off an ACL, maybe even tougher. You really respect a guy who's done that, who's worked as hard as he has. And it was a little tough because he was really climbing the hill there back in 2006, and then to get hurt that early.

But he's making the most out of every opportunity. He's really been working hard, and obviously he's done a real nice job for us, so we're thrilled.

Q. Are his hands as good as they seem to be?

COACH FERENTZ: He's playing pretty well. He was doing a good job in 2006 returning those punts, too. He had some shoulder issues early in that season. But it's been -- that's part of the fun of coaching is to watch guys grow, develop, and then in his case have to overcome some real tough adversity, as well. I really respect people that do that.

Q. You touched on King and Kroul. Could you talk a little bit about Mitch King and what makes him so special? Obviously he was first team Big Ten last year.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, as you know, they're different personality guys. I guess Mitch is probably a little bit more like Norm. Can you envision Norm with that hair? Can you see that? And I'm more like Matt probably, not a good interview and all that stuff.

But Mitch has some flair. He's got a spark. He's that way. He's a fun guy. We got to sit next to each other on the plane ride the other day. I don't know who he made mad, but they put him right next to me down in back. He's a good guy,

good student. He adds some juice to the team out there on the field. Players do that.

Roth did that in a different way. I'm not saying he's Matt Roth, but some guys have that, and Mitch certainly does. He sparks the team with some of his plays.

Q. How do you see King and his NFL potential?

COACH FERENTZ: He's an excellent football player. I can't imagine there are a lot of them that are better than him in college football. I've had a lot of other coaches say that to me. Those aren't my words. But he's a heck of a football player. It's going to be a matter of finding the right fit. He'll never be a 330-pound run stopper like some of the guys you see. But not every team abides by that philosophy; people have different styles of playing defense, too. I'm sure he'll find a home.

Q. How much did you need a game like Saturday, not only to win but to put up the amount of points they did, especially in the red zone?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think two things that were important, protecting the ball better, and then the other part was getting into the red zone, which we've been doing that and then just being frustrated down there. To finish out drives, to get points on the board, that was really big for us, and we needed that.

That's part of football, and we're hardly out of the woods right now. But at least we got to experience some success, so hopefully we can build on that. You know, it's as simple as you hope players -- this is a lot more fun than getting stopped, that kind of thing. So that's a good reason to work even harder.

Q. When somebody gets hurt as badly as Marshall Yanda did on Sunday, do you reach out to them, or do you wait to see if they contact you?

COACH FERENTZ: I mean, it depends. But I coincidentally spoke to him this morning. A friend of mine from Baltimore tipped me off that he had been hurt. You know, just his spirits are great. We were talking about Mitch King and other guys who are up beat and positive as Marshal. I've never met anybody tougher than him.

But it's a tough injury, tough one for him. It's unfortunate. He was really playing well. He's got a great future ahead, and this is going to be a one-year delay unfortunately, but he'll bounce back.

They'll repair it and -- Champ Davis I guess would be a guy I would refer to. Champ went through something like that. It's not easy. It's not an easy recovery, but Champ made it back. If anybody can do it, Marshal can. He's a really determined guy.

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