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An interview with:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: So welcome. Captains are the same four guys. We have James Morris, Kirksey on defense, then Van Sloten and Weisman offensively.

You know, bye week came at a good time. We're at least thus far healthy and will hopefully get through this week without any incidents.

Normally bring a depth chart in, but we're waiting for one to get released on Ohio State. I think we have a pretty good idea who will be starting but we'll get that a little bit later today.

We'll get back on the field today and we're anxious to get started.

Q. Health-wise, how did you get through the bye week?

COACH FERENTZ: Like I said, pretty good. We would have been in a little bit of trouble if we played Saturday. Fortunately, we didn't. Based on what we saw over the weekend, looks like everybody's ready to go. We've just got to get through the week now.

Q. What are some of your thoughts on Ohio State?

COACH FERENTZ: Over the years, typically when you go there, you play against a really good football team. And that's the case right now. They've got guys that look like big-time football players. Play like them. They're coached like them. They're playing at a really high level.

I think as much as anything, if you look at it, they've got a win streak that's approaching 20 games right now. You don't do that by accident. That requires good players, good coaching. It requires good players that understand you have to

show up every week. They've done a great job of that now for a year plus.

You know, it's really hard to find weaknesses unless you count inexperience. They're a little bit inexperienced in some positions but they still have guys that are very, very capable and guys that are playing at a really high level. They're a really tough challenge.

Q. All those inexperienced players have stopped the run really well. What have you seen of them that's been able to gel that quickly?

COACH FERENTZ: We didn't play them last year. If you just walked in not knowing anything and just turned the film on, you'd never know. What you said is very true. That's where they're more experienced. They graduated a lot of really good players defensively a year ago, including one guy that I know got converted. I'm not sure when he was converted, middle linebacker. I think he's a fullback on the roster of the Texans, the Houston Texans.

They had a bunch of guys that played hard, played well, now they've had a changing of the guard, if you will. They've got really good size up front. They're playing a guy that is a true freshman. You'd never know that watching tape. If you didn't know the background, you could throw the film on, you'd see a group that is really talented, plays well. Whatever does open up doesn't stay open very long. That's the sign of a good defense.

Q. How is Miller a different quarterback compared to Pryor? How important are your three linebackers in that regard?

COACH FERENTZ: I figured I'd get asked that question.

They're both really good. I'm not good at comparisons. Pryor is playing in the NFL, starts in the NFL right now. Tells you the caliber of football

player he was for them when he played for them. He's the last guy we saw.

Now you find a guy that's a little different style in terms of size, all that type of thing. But he's fast. He can throw the ball. This guy is fast, throws the ball extremely well. He can get it down the field, far down the field, and it gets there fast and it's pretty accurate. They just put a lot of pressure on you from the defensive standpoint.

For us to stop them, it's going to be tough because they threaten you in the passing game, the guys they put out flank outside the box are really dangerous players. They've got a quarterback that can get it to them. And they've got two outstanding running backs in the backfield if you count the quarterback and whoever they play at running back. It's really whoever they play at quarterback. Ironically, their second-team guys have better statistics than their first-team guys. They've got depth there and they've got real talent.

Q. You guys have had success on third downs. That's an improvement for you. Some of that has been on first downs. What are you seeing?

COACH FERENTZ: That's it. First-down success offensively and defensively can really contribute to third down. It's like anything, you're going to have a percentage of times when you just have to find a way to make a stop and you make it. But it's typically a team thing. Usually that's good that happens, it's team related. Sometimes individuals have to jump up and make a big play.

But, you know, we're certainly doing a little bit better. We're a better defensive team than we were a year ago. I'd say the same thing about our offense. It's everybody kind of working together, just having a little better concept of what has to be done.

Q. From your educated eye, halfway through the season, where physically are you better than a season ago? Is it across the board, a lot of positions?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's at most spots. But it's kind of a different story at every position. First thing that jumps to mind is the defensive line. I just got done talking about them on the teleconference. We weren't very experienced and very stout up there. We're hardly old chronologically, we only have one senior, Dom Alvis up front. But the guys are more seasoned. Certainly Louis is a better player than he was a

year ago. Carl Davis is a better player. And Drew Ott is a little bit more savvy than a year ago.

But it's different at every position. You know, the linebackers are a different story. We've got all those guys back from a year ago, but they're playing at I think a higher level than last year, particularly Hitch.

The combination of those things add up. We still have some areas where we're trying to get caught up.

Q. When you walk into these mega stadiums, like Michigan, this place, does this place stand out in any way, shape or form other than a lot of red? Anything about Ohio Stadium?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it was '90 or in the '90s. Back in the '80s it was tough then. Now they've added on. It long has been one of the tougher places to go. They've got a great following. Great fan support. Their student section is active.

There are a lot of tough venues. This is certainly at the top of the list in the conference.

Q. You were kind of in that in Baltimore, in that realm. You played Cincinnati. Did you ever sense that Ohio State was more popular than the Bengals?

COACH FERENTZ: Back then they were. This year the Bengals are doing pretty well, from what I understand. Back then they were, no question about that.

Ohio has always been a strong football state. I remember recruiting there in 1985, the day before the ballgame. You know, people hardly rolled out the welcome mat. I felt like I was from another country, let alone another state. I went and saw Ron Stoops. He was very nice to me for obvious reasons, since his brother is on our staff. Outside of that, we didn't get treated too well. They're a tight state there.

Q. You're back in there.

COACH FERENTZ: We are. At that time it was just not a good day to show up. They had something on their mind.

Q. Coming out of the bye week, special teams, are you more encouraged by what you've seen?

COACH FERENTZ: We've worked them

hard. It's kind of our whole football team. For us to be good, we're going to have to keep improving with each week, including the bye week.

I think we improved last week. I think we got some things done. It's a little bit like the quarterback discussion six weeks ago or seven weeks ago. You don't know until you get to the field what the results are going to be. Not just this week but over the next six weeks I think we'll learn. If we're doing things right, we should be getting better. I think we've improved this week.

Q. Have your thoughts on punt returns changed at all?

COACH FERENTZ: Boy, that got quite a national response. Better watch what I say. Maybe I should make something up.

But, I'm not real interested in seeing another fake. So whatever it takes to stop the fake, we'll do that. I went home that night and saw one in the Northwestern/Ohio State game, too. Can't get away from it. We'll see what we can do.

Q. What did Northwestern do against Ohio State that you can learn from?

COACH FERENTZ: We're so dissimilar to what Northwestern is, it really doesn't do us a lot of good. The way they operate and do things, there's not a lot we can take from the tape unfortunately, other than it's the most recent exposure.

But their system offense is really different than us, so, it's kind of a tough one.

Q. When you prepare for Ohio State, do you see the things you probably won't be able to do or you're going to do what you think you can do?

COACH FERENTZ: It's a combination of trying to find things that we think might have success, but it has to fit the framework of what we do.

Going back to that point, the week before we played Western Michigan, they had played Northwestern. Again, it was a good tape, but there wasn't a lot of conceptual stuff we could take out of it just because of the dissimilarities between the two of us.

You still look at it, get to see personnel, see reactions to certain things. If you can draw a parallel or correlation, that's great. It's not always easy to do.

That's one of the challenges of the entire season, because there's so much diversity in offense and defense in college football. It's tough

to find stuff that always matches up. But we have that every game, every matchup you have.

Q. In that regard, Wisconsin...

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it helps us. We're not identical to them. But it's that way every year. You know, we try to find some teams that might play the fullback occasionally or a tight end inside in a tight end position as opposed to a flex stop. That's been that way for 15 years. It's a challenge.

Q. What do you think about Urban Meyer?

COACH FERENTZ: I would just say he's been extremely successful. I think it's well-documented. Bowling Green, Utah, Florida, now Ohio State. He's been extremely successful.

Q. Has he done any of the same stuff that he ran when Iowa played them?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes and no. A little different. It's a little different style. But, you know, Coach Herman is there, who was at Iowa State, he's an excellent football coach as well. I'm guessing they work together and the whole staff probably collaborates on that.

They've got a very effective offensive system. Certainly it's heavily quarterback-oriented. They've got the luxury of having two guys that are really good. Their quarterbacks have both been extremely dangerous and productive. Their running backs are outstanding. There's really nothing you can load up on because their receivers are really good. They throw the ball down the field, they threaten you. They threaten all regions of the football field. It's a tough preparation.

Q. Any similarities you can pick out?

COACH FERENTZ: Some, but it's not like pull out that game film and look at it and say, Okay, we got this one down. They've got a lot of things going on.

But there are some plays in there that we saw a month ago that definitely will show up. And other people are running them, too. But it's the quality of the way you run them. That's what really matters.

Q. As you review your team halfway through, does it seem pretty obvious to you that everyone is close to being on the same

page offensively?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's a natural. I've referenced that before. We've been through quite a transition in 14, 15, 18 months, whatever it's been, a year ago February.

Everything is more cohesive certainly today than it was a year ago. Most importantly, the players have a better grasp what we're trying to get done. That's one thing interesting about football, you're always learning from your team, you're always learning from what you see. I'm sure that will be ongoing for the next six weeks. There's always something to learn.

Q. Coach Meyer has ruffled some feathers. Is Urban Meyer healthy for the Big Ten? Does he boost the competition? What are the relationships like with him?

COACH FERENTZ: It's complex. This is before my time. I imagine the guy that coached there in the '70s, '60s probably ruffled feathers, too. I was across the field as an assistant coach. I guess I wasn't. I was gone. It was Earle Bruce. They've had good coaches there.

Jim Tressel is the last guy to win a national championship from our conference. He did a great job there. Now they've got another extremely successful coach. Jim Tressel was extremely successful at Youngstown. Now they've got a coach who's also been extremely successful.

It's hard to think real quick off the top of my head of coaches that haven't done well at Ohio State. It's a place where traditionally they've had a lot of success. They've represented the conference really well through the years.

Q. What has been your interaction with him at league meetings, Media Day events? Casual?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I guess I'm not a guy who is looking for friends right now. I have friends in my personal life. We don't have a dog. Might consider that.

It's been cordial with everybody in our conference. I can't think of anybody that hasn't been cordial with. I've got a lot of respect and admiration for all my colleagues in the league. It's pretty much the same way with Coach Meyer, certainly.

Q. Back to the punt stuff. If you look at the stats, it seems like the majority of the teams in the country don't get a ton of yards.

Does that play into it? Is there a theory that the risk isn't worth it?

COACH FERENTZ: Absolutely. It's hard to return punts, it really is. It's become more difficult, but mainly because of the nature of our rules in college football, which I think really need to be addressed. I've said that for about as long as I've been saying they should replay on-side kicks to make sure the mechanics are correct. But those are both falling on deaf ears. We have some more interesting rules that are getting more attention. Enough said on that.

But it is difficult to return punts. It is a challenge. If you have a really dynamic punt returner, it's a good thing. But you have to make sure you can field the ball first.

Q. What is the next part of growth for the running game?

COACH FERENTZ: Not just to brush it off, but I've been as a coach, a position coach, I'm going back to the '80s now, you know, all throughout my career, because I've been a line coach by trade, it's a tough deal when the run gets shut off. I remember being in games with the Steelers that felt like that. It's just not much fun.

There are some teams that are going to make it very difficult for you to run the football, so you better find some other ways. When you get in games like that, it's not a lot of fun. It's more fun if you can be balanced certainly.

Again, unless you're an option team or you're one of those teams that is going to throw the ball 75 times a game, that's not our aspiration on either end. It works better if you're balanced. But if you're not, you've got to develop some answers.

The two drives we had in that last game that were productive, we actually had three, but two that came up with points, we were throwing the football. That's just kind of what it is.

Q. The offense, would you say having the run taken away forces you to operate outside of your comfort zone?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah. But there's two ways to probably stop the run. If you have a team that really is a dominant run-stopping football team, that's one way. Or the other way is to load it up and take your chances with your corners, what have you. Those are probably the two best ways to stop the run.

You have to have an answer the other

way. It's one of those deals. It's not fun when you can't be balanced.

Q. When you're preparing to face a quarterback who has a tendency to make plays with his feet, do you put faster players in on the scout team?

COACH FERENTZ: We've done that. I've given that some thought. We have the same problem with the question about Terrelle Pryor earlier. Unless we borrowed somebody from the NBA to come down and simulate him. That's assuming you can find somebody that can throw the ball, too.

Those guys, they're freak athletes. There's no other way to put it.

Q. Last time you played at Ohio State, one of your defensive guys, John Lowdermilk, stormed the field and celebrated a Buckeye victory. Are you worried he's a little too amped up for this game?

COACH FERENTZ: Geez, I haven't even thought about that. We better check him this weekend.

He'll be fine. He's doing a good job for us. He ought to be mad, they didn't offer him a scholarship, so maybe that works to our advantage.

Q. When a team has a long streak like that, does that get mentioned around in your locker room, you could accomplish something?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, not so much. To me the one streak that's impressive right now is they're undefeated. They're fourth in the country. You don't fall into that. They've got a really good team and they're playing really well. That may be as impressive as anything. You think about the quarterback being out. Boy, when it happened a year ago, in a tight ballgame, he went down, the other guy jumped in and did a great job, not a good job, a great job.

Again, that's why they are successful. Something happens, somebody else jumps in there and gets it done. That's what they're doing defensively, too.

Q. Do you remember a time when Iowa had a noticeable amount of talent compared to Ohio State?

COACH FERENTZ: No, no. Well, no. If it happened, I can't remember it. I don't think I was

here. That's them and a lot of teams. The history, you go back, I've said this many times, prior to '81, 13 years, two teams playing. The league has come a long way in my mind. I don't have a framework of going back to 1890 or anything like that. I can give you '70 on. The league's come on for a long way. I think that's been good for the league certainly.

Q. What makes the run defense so tough?

COACH FERENTZ: It's a group effort. One thing I mentioned earlier is the fact that we're a little saltier up front. We weren't very salty last year. We're a little bit better there now. Our linebackers are playing better because of that.

I think Hitch has made a jump from a year ago. The experience has really helped him. He's playing like a senior player now.

But it's a combination of things. You can't just do it just with the front seven. Our DBs are doing a good job of containing where they have to, and then we've had guys come up and support and make tackles, too. It's everybody doing a good job.

Q. Do you think you abandoned the run too soon against Michigan State.?

COACH FERENTZ: We lost the game. That could be a reason. You could say we didn't complete enough. I don't know. We've moved on.

Q. Ryan Shazier, he's an All-American. What does he do that is disruptive?

COACH FERENTZ: We didn't play him last year. This is the year of the linebacker in the league it seems like. You probably know better than I, but it seems like everybody has at least a really good linebacker if not a couple.

Yeah, he's just a guy that plays really, really well. He's protected. He does all the things good linebackers do. He's got a great instinct, a great nose for the ball. When I use that word 'instinct', instinct is usually something guys develop, they don't just have it. My guess is he is probably a good student of the game. He knows how to be in the right spot at the right time.

He's just extremely productive against the run and pass. I'm guessing he's probably a good team leader for them, too. Just guessing.

Q. Ohio is an area that you will recruit?

COACH FERENTZ: It is. And I think just in general terms we decided, just like anything you do offensively, defensively, special teams, then recruiting, it's really no different, we talk about it a lot. We look at things.

I think first of all, we can't get the majority of our roster from in-state unfortunately. I wish we could. It's probably just not realistic based on history. So we have to go other places.

Typically when we go into another state, we know we're at least starting in an outside lane behind the in-state institution, maybe some other schools.

Everybody recruits in Ohio. If you look around our league, there are a lot of players playing on other rosters that have done well from the state. They can't take them all. It's a good football state.

So we've been committed to going there. The first guy I think about is Micah Hyde, playing for the Packers now, really under-recruited. Yeah, we're always looking for good prospects certainly.

Q. Has it gotten easier?

COACH FERENTZ: No, it never gets easier. It's a challenge. Recruiting's always been a challenge. When you go into a state like Ohio, you're going to see a lot of people there. It's like a lot of areas right now. Recruiting, it's harder to find hidden gems, if you will, because of the advent of video. It's hard to find guys, hard to sneak guys.

Q. Do you need more from Damon Bullock?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think he's practiced. He's had a good month I'd say now. Yeah, I think he's doing really well. In a perfect world, we'd like both those guys to be contributing.

Q. 2009 through infinity, this is the only time you're playing there. I think 2018 is the next potential opportunity to play there. Does that take something away from the league?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, first of all, I didn't know that, so thanks for informing me. I have not looked ahead much past next week.

But, yeah, I could argue it takes something away from the players not being able to go home for Thanksgiving. But they'll never see that again. You know, it's the same thing with the expansion. Expansion, it's a different world than it used to be. Like it, don't like it, it doesn't matter because you have to deal with it. That's kind of the way it is.

It's like bye weeks. We get two bye weeks this year. Bye weeks are good. That's kind of how you have to look at it. You just deal with what's in front of you.

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