

October 28, 2014



An interview with:

COACH FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome. Congratulations to Bruce Nelson, a tremendous guy, who will be a tremendous representative of the ANF award and is following some really outstanding players. Bruce was certainly not only an outstanding player here but a great story in our program, and we're really proud of him. It will be great to have him back on campus.

Just updates medically as we released this morning with LeShun Daniels, unfortunately, he's going to be out probably six weeks. So that kind of rules him out of playing time. Derek Willies came to me last night and expressed some interest in transferring. His dad has had some medical issues and he's interested in getting closer to home. If that's the case, we'll certainly support him as he moves forward.

That being said, coming off a bye week, we have a big challenge on our hands. We're playing a very good Northwestern team. They've played well probably albeit one quarter of Big Ten play and have a very good football team. So it's typically very much like the teams that they've had. They are well-coached, play hard, and work extremely well, so we're going to have to be at our best certainly and expect a tough contest.

Q. Did you know that Derrick Willies' father was going through health issues?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he's fine. He's got some issues that have been concerning, and my understanding is the prognosis is good, so that's just something that's important to Derek at this point.

Q. Is there a chance he could come back?

COACH FERENTZ: If he has a change of heart in the near future, that would be fine. But I'm not counting on it. It kind of came out of thin air last night. Derrick's had some health issues himself that have kept him off the field for a significant amount of time this year, but we'll see how it goes. He's a young person, and we'll certainly honor his wishes if he chooses to leave.

Q. Has he expressed any kind of dissatisfaction with his playing time at all this year?

COACH FERENTZ: Not to me, no.

Q. Is he okay?

COACH FERENTZ: I think so, yes

Q. Have you finalized Spearman's suspension?

COACH FERENTZ: He'll be sitting out this and next week, a two-game suspension, and then he'll be back in good standing.

Q. What can you realistically expect from Josey Jewell?

COACH FERENTZ: On the topic of injuries, he broke a bone in his hand. He missed the first two games. It was pretty much a dead heat between Josey and Reggie in camp, and then obviously the injury kind of pushed Reggie forward on that one. We're here to see him play. He's played well when he's been out there and doing a good job on special teams. This will increase Cole Fisher's role on the whole deal. And Travis Perry's a guy that we can put around there too. I wouldn't be shocked if all three guys played at some point.

Q. Willies' upbringing included a guardian. Did you deal more with the guardian than the father?

COACH FERENTZ: Absolutely. The guardian was, in effect, the parent at that point.

Great people, very supportive people, and his high school coach is a great person too.

Q. Did that make it more unusual that he wanted to be closer to somebody that wasn't a part of the process?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think so. It's his biological dad, and there is nothing unusual. Typically most people have strong feelings towards their parents. I don't think that's an unusual circumstance at all.

Q. During a bye week you typically get a chance to recharge yourself for the stretch run, but now you've had some distractions.

COACH FERENTZ: I'm laughing because distractions are part of what we do. A bye week sometimes we think it's going to be sit around and drink tea and eat crumpets, it doesn't quite work that way. But with recruiting and football and all that stuff, it's almost like you need a break from your break. At least in season there is a routine, so it's good to be back in a game-week routine, quite frankly.

Q. Looking at Northwestern, I know you always say the next game is the biggest game, but when you look at this game and what is ahead after that, it really magnifies the importance of this game, doesn't it?

COACH FERENTZ: How so? What do you mean?

Q. As far as getting the win and getting some momentum going into the game.

COACH FERENTZ: Well, we're both coming off a loss, so that adds a little something to it. The bottom line is it's a conference game and they're all really important. All I know is when you look at these guys, they've played extremely well in Big Ten play. Going back to the opener at Penn State, they went in there and basically dominated the game and then came back and beat Wisconsin. So you're looking at a team that's really well-coached.

I look at it from an historical perspective. Randy Walker and I both got our jobs at the same time. They beat us at the end of the game in '99, and the next year they're in the Big Ten Championship. They won a co-championship. They've done a wonderful job there. They're an outstanding program. I don't think they get the respect they deserve by a lot of people.

You go back to the '80s, and it was no comparison. But if you look at what was going on since 1999, actually you go a little bit before that, they've done a wonderful job. They've got an excellent football team. All I know is these guys play hard and they play well.

Q. You were pretty frank in your assessment of your team after the Maryland game. How do they respond to that?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll know more this week and the weeks ahead. I just know moving forward if we don't tackle well and don't protect the football, it's going to be tough to win. It's tough to win in this conference doing that. That is the bottom line. We have to play better. We can't turn the ball over. We have to tackle on defense.

Q. Offensively, Northwestern didn't jump out like we're used to seeing. What have you seen from them in the sense of can their offense be effective?

COACH FERENTZ: They find ways to win. That's what good teams do. I don't know what their stats were at Penn State, but it was a pretty one-sided score on the Wisconsin ballgame; the stats were probably toward Wisconsin, but 4-0 in turnovers. So they're playing winning football. They gave up a kick at Minnesota, otherwise that's a different story there. That's conference football. No matter what your style is, whatever your personality is, it's about playing good football and playing clean football.

Q. Defense has allowed a lot of rushing yards the last two games. What have you seen there?

COACH FERENTZ: A lot of little technique things and angles, those types of things. But just in general terms. Even if you let a run outside the tackles -- six, seven, eight-yard gains aren't going to kill you. But if they go beyond that, those things really take their toll. In comparison, the first ballgame, we gave up a free pass of over 200 yards and Indiana gave us three rushes of over 200 yards. That's just a big hole to climb out of. It puts a lot of pressure on your football team.

Bottom line is we have to play better fundamentally, and in conference play, if you can't do that, it's going to be a tough one. Everybody plays the comparative score game. If you look around the conference, there are just no days off.

So you better be ready to play your team each and every week.

Q. You talked about you wanted to keep Mark Weisman fresh. With five games left, does your approach kind of change a little bit? He's only got five games in his college career. Does that lean toward using him more now maybe?

COACH FERENTZ: We're going to do whatever we think gives us the best chance to win. There is no pitch count right now for anybody, and that includes special teams. Whoever can help us win football games, that's what we've really got to be focused on.

Q. You were here when Reggie Roby was kicking off, is Marshall in that league?

COACH FERENTZ: Boy, you're testing my memory there, although I remember when Reggie kicked the ball, you heard it, be it a punt or a kickoff. And Marshall's done a great job. Struggled early with the field goals, but I think his confidence level is really starting to rise now because he's fought through it. Like most players, you go through some tough times, but he's done a really nice job there, and his kickoffs have been great, certainly. There is going to come a time when they're going to come out. Either you return them or you kick them with wind and that type of thing.

One of my fears is we put our guard down and everybody's going to say he's going to kick it out, and it's not that easy. We have to be ready when that time does come.

Q. You said at Maryland that C.J. Beathard may not go. Is he fully functional this week and in the plans at all?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think we have a handful of guys we'll still wait and see on this week. But I think he's fine, and Jake's fine, so we'll let them both go.

Q. Where are you at with the punter situation?

COACH FERENTZ: At Maryland we did the plus-50 punting with Connor, and Dillon handled the rest of it. It's still very close competition.

Q. Will you proceed that way?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll decide this week. We'll decide this week when we see how practice looks.

Q. How do you assess Jake's performance at Maryland? He threw a lot of passes that's unlike you guys. I think a lot of those sacks were part of it. You're going to have sacks.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I did read that we set a record during my time here. I'm just guessing the record we broke was a loss too. I'm guessing we ended up throwing the ball. If you're built like we are, if you throw the ball 50-some times, it usually means you're chasing somebody from behind. It wasn't by design, but that's sometimes the bottom line if we get in that situation again, we're going to have to find a way to be more successful than we were that day.

Q. You watched the film on the offensive line. On the sacks, was it technique? Was it too long pulling the ball?

COACH FERENTZ: It's typically a little bit of everything. Sometimes it's an individual getting beat. Sometimes it's not getting the ball out on time, whatever that means. I mean, if the quarterback's got the ball, you have to protect so it doesn't give anybody an out. Sometimes it may be a misinterpretation of a route, what a break should be, that type of thing.

Q. Is Jordan Canzeri one of those guys that's a little dinged up?

COACH FERENTZ: He's a little dicey. We'll see where it's at. Like I said, if we played Saturday, it's probably a handful of guys out. But that's October. October, November, it's going to be that way.

Q. Where does that leave your running back situation with LeShun out?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, whoever is healthy has a chance to play, basically, is what it comes down to.

Q. Are Wadley and Parker on that next level?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, they're the only two guys left, I think. You've got Mark and Damon, obviously, experienced players, and you have Jonathan who has been getting some playing time

and we've worked Akrum in a little bit on special teams, so at least he's getting his feet wet out there as a player. We'll have to have everybody available because we're running out of guys.

Q. Do you anticipate Austin going back to center this week?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll make that decision this week. I think the good thing is with Tommy going in a couple weeks ago, we functioned pretty well, and I think he did a nice job last time out as well. So we've added to the pool of flexibility. We didn't have much going into it. At least we weren't sure what it was. So I think right now we've got six viable guys that can play and play pretty well and that's a good thing. Boettger got thrown in when Brandon got hurt back early in the season, so those right now are our seven guys, and we'll probably utilize all the guys. Hopefully not Ike, hopefully we won't have to go that way only because I want to keep our tackles out there, seniors.

Q. How important is it to improve the running game?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, it's important. It's important for us to play cohesively, so that's part of what we do. It would be really great to come up with a couple big plays in the run game, but you just keep chipping away and working at it.

Q. That turnover last Saturday or two Saturdays ago, kind of uncharacteristic. You guys hadn't had fumble problems all year?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, typically we've done pretty well, but we had two of them that day. Both two fumbles that were costly and a pick six. That's usually not a good thing either. Like getting a punt blocked is not a good deal. So there are certain things in football that are tough to overcome. We still had a chance to overcome them, but we didn't get it done.

Q. How rewarding are coaching stories like Bruce Nelson?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, you have them every year, but his is pretty dramatic only because -- part of it is circumstantial. We were defining the offensive line at that given time, and we just saw some things in him at tight end that we felt were maybe he could help us a little bit, and Eric Steinbach soon thereafter followed, and Gallery was after that.

But here's a guy who is a walk-on, really kind of unknown to anybody at that time, and we switched him over and he ended up starting his first year at left tackle, as you know. With each year, he gained confidence, and ended up being just one heck of a football player. But beyond that, he's just such a good guy. He's a really humble guy, hard-working guy, and he was back a couple years ago as a captain, and I thought it was a really meaningful and powerful message with our football team.

But that's how he thinks. That's how he's wired. When you understood him talk you understood exactly how things happened back in '99 and 2000 for him because he thinks right and thinks about the right things. He's not afraid of hard work either. He's just one of those guys. He has his challenges too. He had some injuries and things like that, and he got worked a little bit early in his career like most players do. But he was having fun at the end certainly.

Q. Is it hard to find players like that now?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think so. To think that you're going to have a lot of those kinds of stories -- if he had come here in 2000 or 2002 or 2003 he probably wouldn't have been a four-year starter. So it was just a perfect time for him to be here and be part of that thing. But when you have special things that take place, it takes special people to be involved and he's certainly one of them.

Q. What makes Northwestern's defense go? What makes them pretty formidable?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it sounds pretty basic, but it's just they're very well-coached. They don't try, in my opinion to do too much. They play with really good technique. They're very well-coached at all positions. You'll have a hard time finding safeties tackle any better anywhere in college football. In my opinion, it's been that way for quite some time.

To me, just stepping back as an observer since 2008, they've really played well on defense, and they've got a system. They believe in it, their players believe in it, and they just play extremely hard. They play hard. No matter who is in there, they're going at you. If you drop your guard at all, you're going to be in trouble. Even if you're playing at your best, it's not going to be

easy.

So they're very well-coached, and it's not all coaching. Their players do a great job. They just believe in what they do, and they do it very well.

Q. They talked yesterday when Pat Fitzgerald talked, he talked a lot about Iowa and Northwestern being a rivalry. And I think everybody in the Big Ten has a rival with everybody in the Big Ten. But the spirit of this game has really stepped up. Last year when you guys won in overtime, your players rushed the field, obviously felt something.

COACH FERENTZ: I mean, it was an overtime game. Happy as heck to win the game.

Q. Is there something else there? Is there another spark?

COACH FERENTZ: I've read the story about Gary Barnett and Coach Fry, and Gary Barnett did a wonderful job there, and Pat played on that football team, so it's got to be very personal to him, I'm sure. But bottom line, as you're aware, in the '80s that wasn't much of a series. That's well-documented. Since I've been back, it's been a really tough series. They've had excellent football teams. If you look at even last year, which was a disappointing year, how close they were going back to the Ohio State game.

So I just look at it, and since Pat's taken over, they've played really well. They've had good teams and played well in bowl games, even in games they've lost. They beat Mississippi State two years ago, and I think we're all seeing how that program's going.

I think a lot of people make the mistake of maybe living in the past. I mean, since '95 these guys have been really good. They've got a proud tradition, and they play like they have a proud tradition, so they're a good program, excellent program.

Q. They've got a running back too that you recruited pretty hard in Jackson. He's held his profile in the running game. Did you anticipate this type of a player when you were looking at him?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we thought he was a really good player, high school player, and he's proving that right now. He's a good football player, very dangerous.

Q. Between the tackles, he seems to always find a way to get an extra yard. Just he's quick in a tight spot or whatever, what is it?

COACH FERENTZ: He's just an excellent player. He could have been a good defensive player too. That wasn't our intention. Obviously, it wasn't Northwestern's, but he's an excellent football player.

Q. Will LeShun Daniels have an opportunity for a red-shirt? I'm a little foggy on that?

COACH FERENTZ: Probably not, but we'll appeal and take a shot at it. He's had two injuries this year. But I think he's played in four games, and we're past the 50 percent. So it just depends on how the committees look at it. I would not want to try to predict that.

Q. Is Derrick Willies' biological father, is he in Arizona?

COACH FERENTZ: I believe that's correct. That's what I was told, yeah.

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