

**August 28, 2012**



An interview with:

## **COACH KIRK FERENTZ**

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with coach.

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome, everyone. Just start out and let you know our captains this week were selected by the leadership group. They are James Vandenberg and James Ferentz offensively and Micah Hyde and James Morris on defense.

Medically right now, as you probably know we had two guys who had to go through surgery these past couple weeks through camp. We lost Barkley Hill, had surgery last Friday. Then we lost Ruben Lile about 10 days ahead of that. So both those guys will obviously be out this year.

Surgeries went well. They're in the mode of rehabbing right now which is a long, hard road. Then certainly Jordan Lomax came in with a shoulder injury. He won't play this year. Jordan Canzeri is rehabbing from the knee surgery back in the spring and doing well. Those guys are obviously out right now.

We're playing a team, Northern Illinois, who has had a very successful couple of years. They've had success for a long period of time, but last two years won 22 ballgames, 15-1 in the MAC. They've done a great job the last couple years. Excellent football team. Very, very experienced on defense. Very experienced on special teams.

They've got some new faces offensively particularly up front which will match up with our guys defensively. We're a little bit young on that side as well.

I think we've had a productive pre-season. The past three weeks the guys have worked hard, they've had a good attitude, I think we've gotten some things done. Now it's another step for us,

first game week. Obviously we go on the road and play a very good opponent.

All in all, a big challenge for us this week. We'll see how we handle it. First time out, game week. Hopefully that will go well. We'll see what we can do on Saturday.

I'll throw it out for questions.

**Q. Can you assess where Damon Bullock is right now? Do you envision him being your bell cow or try to mix it up the first few weeks?**

COACH FERENTZ: He hasn't played an awful lot. Got a lot of work in the spring and really improved. Certainly did a good job this camp. So we feel good about that.

I think with our situation right now, losing Barkley, we're down to three guys we can envision going into the ballgame, Damon being the most experienced, and he has played, but he's hardly a seasoned player. I think all three of those guys will be in there and we'll go from there.

All three of the guys practiced well and we expect them to do a good job out there. I'm sure we'll have some ups and downs like all young players.

**Q. Brad Rogers is the back-up back?**

COACH FERENTZ: He's good to go. Mark Weisman had a good camp. Maybe as improved as anybody player on our team. Those are our five primary guys. Jonathan Gimm, I'd be remiss if I didn't bring him up, he really had a good spring, a good season.

**Q. Do you have a plan for that rotation?**

COACH FERENTZ: I have a plan to play all three guys and see how they do. Certainly right now I expect all three guys to be in the game. I don't know to what extent. We'll see how that plays out. We'll look and see what the week of practice looks like and go from there.

**Q. Do you have a plan for rotation at running back?**

COACH FERENTZ: We have a couple players in this category. Mike missed a lot of last year with the knee injury, too. He's coming off a knee rehab. Did a nice job throughout camp. So he's missed some playing time, last year, kind of like Maurice Fleming. But both those guys are doing well. I think real do a good job. Mike is a good back.

**Q. Greg Garmon, what have you seen from him so far?**

COACH FERENTZ: Greg's done a good job as well. Both those guys may go the wrong way a time or two. We kind of anticipate that. They're not well-versed yet. Greg is a pretty dynamic player. He's a guy that can do a lot of things. Very quick, seems to have a real passion for playing. We're excited about him.

**Q. Meyer solid on the kickoffs?**

COACH FERENTZ: Mike, I think, has really grown a lot. We have a lot of guys that really, if you would, turned the corner a little bit in spring practice. I think about him and James Morrison. So, yeah, confident he'll do a good job for us. We got him for two years, so we're excited about that.

**Q. They had Harnish. How do you think it's going to be different with Lynch?**

COACH FERENTZ: Time will tell. Harnish was just a tremendous performer, outstanding player. Playing in the NFL right now. Last time I checked he was. But his productivity in a lot of ways, he did so many things for them.

We're not quite sure what to expect right now. They have a new coordinator, a lot of new faces, good receivers, good tight ends. Those guys have played. We've seen them on film. They have good running backs.

They're most experienced at the offensive line and the quarterback position and we're speculating there a little bit, too. Lynch is a big, solid, sturdy guy, so he's a running threat. I think he threw 20 balls total or the two years combined. I think he's about three-out-of-four completion-wise, but we'll have to wait and see.

**Q. What is your assessment of the defensive line?**

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're making progress. That's our most inexperienced group by far. I thought they progressed through the course of spring and now if you look at it, we get Dom back and Carl Davis. That's going to help us.

They're making progress. I think probably to contrast it to a couple years ago, I really would envision us playing six, seven, eight guys during the course of a game. I'm not sure we have somebody that can go out there and play 70, 75, 80 snaps right now. It's going to be a week-by-week process.

I like what I see. The guys are working hard. They got a good attitude. Steve Bigach has emerged as a leader in that group. Louis Trinca-Pasat has done that in his own way. He's a younger guy, doesn't miss much. A tough-minded guy. Those two guys and getting Dom back helps us. The younger players moving along. Joe Gaglian is a senior who has been injured a long, but has done a good job as well.

It's going to be a collective effort, but we're making progress.

**Q. Did you realize putting your starting lineup together that all five were from the state of Iowa?**

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think somebody brought it up during the summertime. That wasn't our intention, but it's not a surprise. We've had a lot of good linemen. We're excited to see how these guys perform as well.

**Q. Four true freshmen in the two-deeps. How many others are going to play?**

COACH FERENTZ: The four guys we list will play, Connor the punt, the two backs, Buford we plan on playing him. A couple guys we're treading water with. But right now you can count on seeing those four guys unless something happens.

**Q. What impressed you about Kevin Buford in fall camp?**

COACH FERENTZ: He's just done a good job. BJ was out for a couple days, it moved Greg up and gave him more of a chance to play a little bit. We liked him in recruiting. Like him even more now. He's got a good ability, great attitude, very positive young guy, works hard. Still has a lot to learn. But I think he'll do a good job for us.

**Q. Freshman receiver on the depth chart, he's sort of broken through. What's his story, Hillyer?**

COACH FERENTZ: Jake, he and Don Shumpert were quietly improving at the end of spring last year. I don't think anybody was really ready to sign off on them at that point. Over the last three weeks I think both those guys have really shown us a lot more than they did maybe previously. They're hardly there yet. They're both young players game experience-wise. But I think they're on the right track right now. I'll throw Jordan Cotton in, too. He has flashed at times, but this was by far his best three weeks of practice as a Hawk-Eye. He made some better catches this camp. But again, he hasn't played a lot.

That's like a lot of our guys right now. I think we have some potential, but how we react to game situations is different. We're on the road on top of it. It's going to be a little bit unique. Hopefully they can handle the activities this weekend. We'll see.

**Q. You have a couple of walk-on linebackers that flashed in camp. What did you see out of them? Are they scholarship guys now?**

COACH FERENTZ: Not yet. Both guys worked hard first and foremost. Quinton missed some time practice-wise, so it's a jump ball right there. If something would happen to James, I'm not sure who the first guy would be in anyway. Maybe somebody else, or Hitchens or Kirksey. Travis started making his move in the spring. He did a nice job. We think he'll be a really good special teams player. He's done a good job at linebacker. I'm not going to throw him in the Grant Steen category because it's premature at this point. At this point it's a little bit like that. He's a guy that's really impressed us with the way he practices, works. Extremely conscientious. Just kind of interesting. We heard so many great things about him during recruiting a couple years ago, and pretty much everything that anybody said with him has really come to fruition. That's what we're seeing from him in all walks of his life. He's done a great job.

**Q. Special teams. Are they ready to go?**

COACH FERENTZ: Hopefully we get off the rollercoaster. We've been on a little bit of a rollercoaster. That's one of our goals. There's



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going to be some in the punting game. Probably no different than when Eric Guthrie started a year ago, Donnie four or five years ago. Basically all our guys, you have some ups and downs there. It turned out pretty well for those guys. We think Connor has that kind of potential to end up being a really good player.

I go back to last year with Eric Guthrie. Great stories on our team last year. That part is a little bit of a variable right now. Certainly with Mike Meyer, he's kind of ramped up his game. Marshall Koehn right behind him as improved as well. Feel good about that. Casey Kreiter is an excellent deep snapper for us. Reassuring to have him back for a couple years.

On the return game, we are anxious to see Micah Hyde be our punt returner, and on the kick return game we will probably use several different guys. Hopefully we can get a little bit of spark there depending whether or not we get an opportunity to return it. They moved the ball up a little bit, so I think some of those returns will get cut out.

**Q. What was it about playing Northern Illinois in Chicago that made you want to take your program there again?**

COACH FERENTZ: It seems from our vantage point it's a win-win situation. Our fans seemed to enjoy it and embraced it, which is good. It's, I don't want to say a convenient game, but at least it's a lot better than going to the West Coast in my mind. We can get on a bus and have a fairly predictable outcome what time we're going to get there, fairly predictable outcome coming home. It will be well before midnight with some luck. That part is good.

You're playing in a pro stadium which is exciting to players. I think they like that opportunity just based on some of the bowl games we've played in pro stadiums. To me it just makes sense.

I think the big thing is we don't want to do it every other year, wear off the novelty. Our fans respond to it. I think Northern feels the same way.

**Q. How concerned are you about playing surface?**

COACH FERENTZ: We'll play whatever is there. If it's a parking lot, we'll play there. Last time we were there, it was a little bit hard, to say the least. There's nothing we can do about it.

We'll play on whatever is there.

**Q. Do you do anything in practice this week as far as preparing them for that?**

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we've been off our grass fields mainly because of the heat this summer. It was a new field in May. We want to get on the grass. We've been kind of off it the last couple weeks, give it a chance to get rooted in. We'll be on it Tuesday and Wednesday, that will be it.

I doubt our field will be as hard as it was five years ago. Hopefully the field this year won't be as hard as it was five years ago. If it still is, we'll still play.

**Q. Can Carl Davis do things at his size that maybe others can't?**

COACH FERENTZ: The closest thing we have probably had, correct me if I'm wrong, Collin Cole is probably the biggest guy we had in there. Carl is a pretty athletic guy. Like any new player, it's a matter of playing with his technique. You still have to play with technique even though you're bigger. Part of that is pad level. I think that's a challenge for any younger player, playing with the technique they know they have to play with, that's one of the challenges, then playing with consistency.

He's a hard guy to move if he keeps his pads down. Hopefully that will work to our benefit. We're excited about him. I think he's got a good future.

**Q. Brought in a couple true freshmen that are bigger. Would you like a bigger defensive line?**

COACH FERENTZ: You know, it's not necessarily by design. We just don't have the option necessarily of picking the guys we want all the time. You know, we feel really good about getting Faith Ekakitie and Jaleel Johnson here. I think they're going to be good players in their own right. If it works out that's right, that's great.

If there are a couple Karl Klugs available, we'll take them, Matt Krouls, Mitch Kings, all those guys have been productive in their own way. That's the thing, getting the player to a level where they can go out and perform like those guys have done.

**Q. After all the work you've done, now that it's here, game week, can you tell the**

**increased level of excitement amongst the coaches and players?**

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't seen the players since Sunday. I think they had a little better step. Saturday was really our first day off since we got going where we didn't see each other. That's always healthy. I think all of us were ready to transition. If you ask the players, they were probably ready two weeks ago, maybe three weeks. Pre-season gets old. It's a lot of the same stuff, 1-2. So it's a tough road.

Yeah, I think everybody will be certainly excited. Hopefully today when they walk in here, there will be a little different vibe. I guess last Monday we were off, too. So I lied. That was our second day off, Saturday. We're used to not being together on Mondays.

Today is officially game week. We'll be into a different mode of operation, which is good. We were talking about it upstairs. It always feels like it takes forever to get to the first one. Once you're here it's going to be a blink and we'll be done. Just one of those phenomena.

**Q. Many of your Big Ten contemporaries are going against big teams like Boise State, Alabama. Is that something you would ever consider doing right off the bat?**

COACH FERENTZ: I'm comfortable with what we're doing. I think we're on the right track. Scheduling has always been the challenge, seems like it has. I think it's going to continue to be one. I'm comfortable with what we're doing.

**Q. Tommy Donatell has had an odyssey of a career. What do you hope to see from him this year?**

COACH FERENTZ: Tommy has done a great job. Doesn't get talked about an awful lot. Last year he helped us out at linebacker. He's a guy that was a high school quarterback. That was his strength. He went through a couple knee injuries. Gray-shirted him his first year here. The only reason he came here, I don't want to misquote, speak for Tommy, but Matt Bowen and Aaron Kampman were playing for us. Up in Green Bay that's where it all got started. Interesting that a guy from Atlanta would choose to walk on. Those guys made an impression on his dad and also on Tommy.

He's worked very hard. He's a very

conscientious guy. Improved with everybody opportunity. He's been like a lot of our success stories, with every year he's gotten better. Works hard, goes about his business in a real positive way. Has been a great team member. I'm really hopeful that he'll have a great senior year. I think he's very excited about it.

**Q. You talked a little bit about redshirt freshmen. If you factor those kind of guys into who you see potentially playing, then add people in other classes who maybe haven't played a snap, what is the actual game experience level of this team in your mind compared to some of your other teams?**

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't tracked it exactly just for obvious reasons, I don't think I want to know the answer to that. I think Steve said this is our youngest team in terms of senior class, how many senior starters we have, which is kind of interesting if you think about it over 14 years.

But at the same time we have guys like James Morris or Christian Kirksey. We have juniors that are capable of playing like seniors and acting like seniors, which is important, too. The seniors that may or may not start, they've done a great job. They're totally in. They've done a great job off the field as well. They're giving us a good leadership base as well.

We feel like this team can be successful. With that being said, we know how inexperienced we are. We know every step is going to be a little bit of an adventure. That's starting this week getting on a bus taking a little road trip, different than playing at home, playing an opponent in a strange stadium that is a dangerous opponent.

Every step is going to be an adventure and every step hopefully will be a learning experience. We feel like we have the potential to have a good football team. We have to maximize our opportunities. How well we can do that will determine how well the season goes.

**Q. This being a young team, do you think this is a good lesson for them right out of the gate?**

COACH FERENTZ: I wouldn't object to it being at home and going there next week. It raises the level a little bit more. The biggest focus is Northern Illinois. They're a good football team. They've beaten Big Ten teams in recent history. There's no saying it couldn't happen again this week. That's our number one thing, is focusing on them. Doing that as well as trying to play our best.

Those two things are the things that are prominent in our thoughts right now.

**Q. Will this week's practice decide who starts at strong safety?**

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we'll see how it goes. We'll see how it goes. We're comfortable with either guy. I think whoever ends up getting the start, both will probably play some and they'll both play on special teams.

**Q. What did Connor Kornbrath show you right away? Feels like you made that decision fairly early at camp.**

COACH FERENTZ: It wasn't necessarily set in stone. I think that the we've had two public practices. The second one he got the majority of the reps that day. We wanted to see what he'd do.

But basically we chart those guys like we chart everybody else. Probably easier to chart punters and kickers than a right guard or something like that.

Right now we just feel like he gives us our best chance. That's kind of the decision we made.

**Q. Are you eager like the fans to see how the pieces fit together?**

COACH FERENTZ: Eager and uncertain, that's a good way to put it. It's like that every season. You're always anxious, excited, but anxious. I think that's probably where we're at right now. I'm sure Northern feels the same way. Their guys are ready to get on the field and see where things are at a little bit.

It's going to be interesting. But that's why you work. That's why you practice. Now we'll see how things start to come together. It's going to be 13 weeks, a bye week in there, but we'll learn every week for sure.

**Q. What do programs like Northern Illinois do that make them continually successful?**

COACH FERENTZ: It starts with recruiting. Coach Novak did a great job of giving them stability. I always felt it was a sleeping giant type program, if you will, because they had their ups and downs for a while. From my vantage point, at least when Coach Novak went there, they did a nice job of recruiting the area. Tulsa comes to mind. We were talking about Tulsa a little while ago. I think they've done the same thing.



Chicago, there's a lot of good players in the state of Illinois, a lot of good players that maybe get overlooked in some ways. They did a good job of doing that. They've also supplemented their roster with players from around the area. Most important, they've been well-coached, whether it's Coach Novak, Coach Kill, now Coach Doeren has done a good job there as well. It's a good program.

That's one thing about the MAC Conference, there are good teams there. Look at what they've done in bowl games. Certainly that's indicative I think of the kind of football they play. It's a good conference.

It's interesting. I haven't followed to close recently, but when I got here, look at the quarterbacks from that conference versus just about any conference, you think about Roethlisberger, guys down at Marshall, pretty good players come out of that league.

**Q. Opposing coaches have said about Iowa, we know what the Hawkeyes are going to throw at us, it's just a matter of stopping them. But with two new coordinators that's not going to be the case this season. Do you look at that as a pretty big advantage?**

COACH FERENTZ: Yes and no. Yes and no. They know, but they don't know. Vice versa. You really don't know what the mix is going to be. In general, in terms of identity, everybody goes through that a little bit in the first game, there's always that uncertainty. We're looking at the same thing with them. Speaking of excellent coaches. They have Coach Doeren back, who is really an offensive coordinator, and he knows us pretty well. It's going to be an interesting matchup that way.

Never quite sure what's going to happen in the first game, what you're going to see. These guys do a lot of things on special teams that give you headaches, a lot of preparation things there, too.

I don't feel it will play to our advantage or not. There's a little bit of that with everybody.

**Q. How similar schematically is their defense from when Doeren was at Wisconsin and you faced them?**

COACH FERENTZ: It's similar, it's fair to say. There's a fair amount of carryover. I wouldn't say carbon copy, but fair amount.

Thank you.