

September 23, 2008



An interview with:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

THE MODERATOR: We have Coach Ferentz.

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome. Just to start out, if I could, I recognize the loss of a great guy, Ron Kenyon passed away this past weekend Saturday. Ron's an amazing story. Obviously he's been a great friend of our programs, a great friend of the university's. Everybody in our program's extremely appreciative of the gift that he and Margaret made many years ago to make the Kenyon Practice Facility a possibility for us. It's been really helpful in our program's development.

Ron's an amazing guy. They're an amazing couple. They were married 68 years. Ron was 90 when he passed. You know, not many folks stay together like that for that long. So it's just a heck of a story.

I'll share this with you, too. Ron was an orphan, lost his mom and dad both before the age of nine. He's a guy who worked extremely hard to become a success. Obviously showed a great deal of commitment. He and Margaret made quite a team. They worked together basically for their entire lives. Were together for a long, long time.

So, on behalf of everybody involved with our program, athletic department, we express our condolences to the Kenyon family. It's a tremendous family.

On a happier note, I think as all you know Chigozie Ejiasi will be filling our player developmental position. We are very enthused about having Chic assume that role. We had a very high level of interest for the position, wide variety of candidates and types of candidates. It was interesting. It gave us a chance as we sorted through all the prospective candidates, helped us

shape some ideas. I think that being said, you know, Chic is officially on board now, and the position will continue to evolve and develop as we go along. It's kind of a maiden voyage, if you will.

The bottom line is what we're looking for, Chic is always going to be a resource to our players, to our staff. He'll be a person that's going to supplement and support both those groups. I think he'll do an excellent job. The number one focus again, I've said this many times, is to help our players transition better into the college life. I think obviously transition is something everybody goes through, student-athletes, plain students, the difference being student-athletes are under a little bit more scrutiny, they're under a little bit more, I don't want to say pressure, but I think their expectation levels are a little higher from certain people.

The bottom line is we just want to better help our players transition academically, socially and football-wise. That's the number one role he'll have. We want to better educate our players, too. We've talked about that in the past. Chic will have a role in that. He'll help coordinate programs for us, one being a mentor program. That will happen on a couple levels. We've already got that process beginning. Maybe as important as anything, just having an opportunity to spend one-on-one time with players. That's something no coach gets enough time to do. Certainly I think any parent would tell you the same about their kids. So it's really not a lot different. But we are really happy to have Chic with us. He's a guy that I have great faith in, great trust in. He played in our program and certainly knows the university, being a graduate. Knows our program. Knows Iowa City. Knows the state of Iowa. I think he's a great example of what's right about college football. So we're thrilled to have him join us.

I can say the same thing about the other guy that's going to join our program, LeVar Woods will be assuming Chic's role. We are thrilled to

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death to have LeVar back with us. I'm sorry that his career's over, but he's done a fantastic job as a professional football player. He really put together a great career for a guy who was a good, good college player. Had a nice career as an NFL player. Like all football players, your football career ends at some point. I think LeVar has an interest in football potentially being a coach down the road. So we're thrilled to have him in the program. Same thing as I just said about Chic. He's a great example I think of what's right good college athletics. We're thrilled to have LeVar with us, too.

Moving forward, injury front right now. Good news, Tarpinian, we expect him to be back. Mike Sabers, hopefully he'll be ready this week. Couldn't quite go last week. We expect Brett Morse to be back also. I'll know more here in a couple days, see how he holds up in practice. But looks like that's realistic at this given point. Those are positives.

Captain wise, we'll go with King and Cole again defensively, Ron Bruggeman again offensively, and then Shonn Greene will be our fourth captain for the ballgame Saturday. We are obviously excited about homecoming weekend. I know it's a little bit special for everybody and certainly good to have a lot of folks back on campus. We'll have a great challenge on our hands playing Northwestern. They're off to a tremendous start. Very experienced football team. They're playing very, very well right now.

Offensively you look at their skilled players. I think it all starts right there. Bacher has done a nice job at quarterback for them. Got a bunch of good receivers. Peterman is the leader out there being a senior. Sutton is one of the best players in our conference, not just running backs, but one of the best players in the conference. He's an outstanding player.

I think defensively you start up front. They're very, very experienced. All on defense are experienced, but up front they've got a lot of good players that played very well. They're deep up front. Wootton on the outside's a real good player. Then Gill, I'm not sure we blocked him more than three times last year in the game. That may be an exaggeration. It may not have been three. He gave us a lot of trouble. Then they've got some young guys. This guy Brown jumped in there last weekend, three sacks in one ballgame. They've got some young talent, some real experienced guys.

Probably the biggest thing I'd say about them, they're just not giving up big plays. They're playing very, very well right now. Playing smart. Making you work for everything. When you do that, that's the sign of a good defense. Special teams-wise, they're doing a good job there, too. The thing of note, their specialists look to be very, very improved from a year ago. The punter is doing a good job. Place kicker is doing an excellent job. Eight for eight right now. Those just aren't chip shots. He's doing it whatever range they throw him out there. They're a very good football team, certainly worthy of their record. We'll have to be at our best. That's where the work begins this afternoon.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Who is your quarterback Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: Just as I listed the other day, Stanzi will start the game.

Q. Christiansen going to play?

COACH FERENTZ: I can't tell you that right now. We'll see how it goes. Probably be a gut feeling, you know.

Q. Are you hoping that Ricky can finally just sort of get out there and show you what you need to see so you don't have to keep doing this?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not pulling for either guy. It's not a matter of pulling for one guy or the other. I think at some point the picture will become a little bit more clear. Whenever that happens, we'll be there.

Q. What changed between second half Saturday and your decision to start Ricky?

COACH FERENTZ: Played 30 more minutes. That's about all I can tell you. Had a chance to look at the tape. That's just the conclusion. I think he gives us our best shot this week. That will be the plan.

Q. Just going back to the hiring of Chic. You mentioned that there were a wide variety of people that were interested in the job. Were you preferring to have someone kind of in-house within your program to fill this position?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, it wasn't a requisite, but certainly I think there are advantages.

But a lot of it depends on how you spin it, which way you want to go. We brought three candidates to campus that were all very good and all would have been very good. They all have very diverse backgrounds. Neither of the other two were former players here. One guy was a former basketball player, actually, former student-athlete. The other guy, totally different realm.

But, there are a lot of different ways to go with it. I guess at the conclusion, we just felt like this was the best thing for us at this given point. I just feel very good about it. I think it's going to be a good step to assist us in our quest of having more success.

Q. What have the players been saying about it since you made the hire? You said he's earned the respect of the players.

COACH FERENTZ: I really haven't gotten much feedback from the players. We didn't really announce it officially till Sunday with our team. We're just kind of getting the wheels in motion on that front.

But Chic's been around this program now for several years. He was here prior to that as a player. He was highly respected as a player because of how he operates, how he conducts himself. It's been no different since he's been back here. And he interfaces with an awful lot of people. Our players certainly, recruits, recruits' parents, faculty members, administrative members here. You know, just part of his role right now -- his former role. So I've had a chance to see him interface with an awful lot of different folks. Same types of people that he'll be interfacing with now in this role. I'm just really comfortable that he'll do a great, great job. Be a guy that also helps us develop this position because it is a developmental position. Pardon the pun on that one, but it really is. We've got some very clear ideas what we want to get done with it. But, there's a lot of things that are going to be shaped here in the next year, two years, three years. Kind of like starting a new playbook, if you will.

Q. Do you envision him working strictly with players on campus or with recruits as well?

COACH FERENTZ: With recruits, only recruits that come to campus. He can't get on the phone with them. We wouldn't want him to. Can't correspond with them. He'll be available to talk with them when they're on campus.

The primary focus and mission is for first-year players. That's where the emphasis is. Then I think we kind of work bottom up. But he's available to everybody on our football team. As you might imagine, as this position goes along, the base will be wider and stronger. The guys that are freshmen now, when they're seniors, I think they'll probably be comfortable knocking on his door, stopping in. Down the road, that will be part of it, too. Helping guys not only coming in but also leaving, assist them with employment opportunities, those types of things, networking. That will all be part of the package, yeah.

Q. What kind of advantages does Ricky Stanzi bring, intangibles, that either your team has lacked or what can he do?

COACH FERENTZ: You folks are all watching just like I'm watching. I don't know how comfortable I am just talking about -- I know I took a little bit of a lashing for my 'gut feeling'. But I can't share everything I observe or everything I think. I'm just not comfortable doing that. There are certain things that are for me and our coaches to visit with and think about what have you.

I think everything I've read, everybody's had their opinions about what the advantages and pluses are of both players, and the minuses of both players. It's an open book right now. So I don't know. I don't know what else I can say at this point.

Q. LeVar, did he contact you?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we've stayed in touch. I talk to a lot of former players. I've always been curious about what he's been thinking about, what he might be thinking about when his career ends. Probably the most significant talks we had were back in April I guess it would have been, he was here for the spring game, just kind of was a little bit more pointed with some of my questions towards him. He wasn't sure where he was at as far as finishing his career, that type of thing.

But I think in the back of his mind, he's been interested about coaching, just football in general. This is a good role for him right now because he could walk away from it in two weeks and it wouldn't kill us and it won't kill him. I know he's committed for a longer period. He's moved his family up here. So he's ready to go there.

But it will be a good way for him to get initiation, because there's a big difference between

being a player and being a coach. One of the best young coaches I've ever been around is Bruce Kittle captain here in '81, worked here four years. At the end of four years he came to the conclusion that we were all out of our minds. He didn't want to try to have a marriage and raise a family doing what we do. I admired him for that. Then he went to law school. It's been a long -- he's back coaching now at West High. He's got better control of his hours, his life, and his family life that way. That's part of the process of figuring this out if this is what you want to do, seeing it firsthand. You see the part that's not what players see. And there's a lot more to it than what players see.

Q. Are you done with kicker rotation?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're heading in that direction, yeah. I think right now we'll lean towards Trent a little more with the field goals.

Q. Why is that, coach?

COACH FERENTZ: Same thing. I mean, we make observations. That's our job, is to observe, make decisions. Some work out, some don't. You know, my guess is first time Trent might miss one, Geez, was that a good decision? But it's just the nature of the game.

So, you know, I just think it's same as everything else. It gives us our best opportunity. And that being said, you know, I'll qualify both Daniel and Jake. Nobody is down on either one of those guys. They're doing a lot of good things. They're counting on them to help our football team.

Q. What did you tell the players that they were going to be elevated to first team?

COACH FERENTZ: We've had a couple of days here now since the ballgame came forward. Take use of that time.

Q. It's the fifth game. You had a frustrating loss. Could have had that one. How big is this game?

COACH FERENTZ: Each and every one are very big and they're all special. That's the nature of football. You try to make the most you can of every opportunity in front of you. And basically you have a week block to do it in. When that week block's up, you go to the next block. It's about the best way I can put it. We're moving into conference play. So to say that's not significant, that would be obviously wrong. But that last game wasn't a league game, but we wanted to win it badly for a lot of reasons. It would have been

helpful in a lot of areas. We came up a point short. It's a long list of things that could have been done differently or what have you, done better.

That's the list we went over on Sunday. We're trying to prepare that a little bit, improve that. That's football. I was on a plane last night, you know, just reading an article about the Steelers being 2-0 going into their game last weekend. Had a runningback that had 200-yard games. He got held to 20. The quarterback got sacked eight times. Chances are they're still a pretty good football team and will come back and play well. The Patriots, they didn't have exactly a great day either. That's part of football. It's disappointing. Sometimes things don't go the way you hope or plan. You just turn your focus to the next one. You do that well enough in November, you can think about some other stuff, too.

Q. Talk about the offensive line. Four straight 100-yard games. Gave up six sacks. Not all of them their fault. What have you seen out of them this year?

COACH FERENTZ: Again, you caught yourself on that one. They didn't give up six sacks. We gave up six sacks as a team. They had their hand in a couple of them. But I think we're making improvement. We're showing signs of progression or progress. But that being said, there are a lot of things that we still can get better at. Talk about things that hurt us in the ballgame. We didn't execute a very fundamental play after the first turnover on an early down. We didn't execute a very fundamental play very well. We ended up with subpar play as a result of that. I'm talking about up front. Next thing you know, we're kicking a field goal. If we had done a little better there, you never know. I mean, we might have scored on that play or at least we might have had a better second or third down option.

There are a lot of little things that happened during the course of the game. That was part of the message to the team Sunday, all those little things really add up. Right now I know the focus is intense on our quarterback situation. But I'm looking at a punt block that gives them the ball at midfield, they get a touchdown drive. A punt block is like walking a guy in the ninth inning. It's not a good thing. I'm looking at a punt we could have killed or should have killed within the five yard line that would have given them 95 yards to go. Options are, we would have had good field

position. Might have gotten us a field goal.

There are a million things you look at during the course of a game. I guess we start at the offensive line. That being said, we're making progress. I think the guys are working hard. I think they're improving. It's like our football team, there's a lot to be enthused about right now, but we're hardly there. That's the focus, is what can we do to clean up some of those little things to give us a higher proficiency level when we're operating out there.

Q. I know you're not big on stats right now, but are third down conversions starting to get to you?

COACH FERENTZ: No, it's not getting to me. It was clearly a factor in the ballgame the other day. And, again, part of that, when you blow something on first down, it makes it a little bit tougher on third down. Something we ought to be able to execute. I'm not talking about an unrealistic expectation there.

But, yeah, probably the only stat I've really focused on too significantly would be our turnover ratio, which has been okay. But without any doubt, you know, third down is a huge part of success. If we don't get that, and I'm more focused on where we were Saturday, if we can't improve on that, it's going to be tough.

Q. Can you pin it down?

COACH FERENTZ: No. It's like sacks. Negative yardage plays get you. Second and 17 jumps out at you right away. Whenever you get behind in the count, it just makes it a little bit tougher. We did a lot of that last year. That brings on more sacks. It just compounds everything. Doesn't only affect your third down proficiency ranking, but just it makes it tougher to operate.

Q. I see you have both Brandon and Tony listed for tight end. Is it just a matter of seeing how well Tony does in practice in terms of determining how much playing time he'll get on Saturday?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes and no. I mean, yes. If he's healthier, which I think he will be. He's not a hundred percent right now. He's certainly not pain free, as you'd expect. But he's playing well. He's practicing well. Last week was a big step for him. He got a lot more work during the week. When we get him back full speed, then I consider it to be two starters. That's probably why I got them doubled listed.

I look at Brandon Myers as a starter. I think he's played very well for us. He's continually improved. You know, starting last year, the beginning of last year, I think he's elevated his play. He's doing a great job. When we get Tony back, we think we got a good player. He was doing really a great job before he got injured. So that's one of the few areas where we had depth. And we think Allen Reisner has really done a good job, too. That gives us three players there that are, you know, guys that can go in the game that we're not worried about at all.

Q. Can you tell me about some of the play calling on Saturday.

COACH FERENTZ: What do you want to know (laughter)?

Q. Shonn Greene had no carries, then the rolling out Jake left-handed to the right.

COACH FERENTZ: Left-handed quarterbacks have to be able to go to the left or right, and right-handed quarterbacks have to go left and right. If you're going to play, that's part of the deal. I mean, that's just part of the deal. And it doesn't matter if you're a lefty or a righty, that's the way it goes.

Shonn, we're going to try to use him wherever we feel we can. The circumstances of the game are going to dictate what we're doing. That's something you can go back and second guess that one, too.

Q. Knowing that Shonn wasn't in his best playing shape, worked himself into playing shape as the season started, are you pleasantly surprised how well he's playing?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he's really doing a nice job. He's definitely closer to go a hundred percent. He's not there yet. He's awfully close. His attitude's been great. He's running hard. He's been a great team guy. I'm not surprised by any of those things. Clearly, we'll keep working him. He's been a real strength of our football team offensively and our whole football team. We'll try to use him as wisely as possible.

This being said, the other guys are going to have to help out, too. We're going to have to keep bringing them along also.

Q. Did you think two years ago he could be this kind of player?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we're all real excited about him as a football player. You know, in 2005, it was tough to put him out there. We had Albert Young playing pretty well, ended up leading the conference in rushing. We thought he had that potential. He played very well on special teams. He's really doing a good job. But we've still got a long race to run. But we're really counting on him to have a great year, keep his yards per carry up there. It would be great if he could.

Q. How is Joe doing right now?

COACH FERENTZ: He's doing well. That's part of the reference I was making. I think we got to bring him along. We're going to have to spell Shonn. The biggest two things you have to worry about, I'm not going to talk about one, but the other one is pass protection, making sure he's on target. I think with each week, certainly we're seeing an improvement there, so that's good.

Q. Northwestern's defense has a lot of sacks, tackles for loss. Can you talk about what they do so well that lets them do that, how you counter that.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, they've got good players. They're experienced. They play hard. But it is amazing. I think they're three sacks off last year's total. In four games, I think it's 15, does that sound right? They're just playing hard. Then the other factor, you get a guy like Brown jumping in the game yesterday who is a second-team guy getting three sacks. That's pretty extraordinary. So they've got a lot of guys that work hard. They've got good talent up there. I hate to sing loud strings to the team, but I would say their front, that's one of the strengths of their defensive football team.

Q. Do you have to consider how Jake might be being received by the fans?

COACH FERENTZ: It seems like they liked him a lot better last time coming off the bench. I can only base it off the last two exposures. But that, again, is the nature of playing quarterback. I think we've all talked about that one before, too. If he comes in and wins the game, he'll be a hero. If he comes in, we don't win, it will probably be his fault.

Q. I know you obviously don't really care to talk much about spread offenses.

COACH FERENTZ: It's one of my favorite topics. I don't mind it. Go ahead (laughter).

Q. When you look at your defense, the fact they've gone up a few already and done well, how much more confidence do you feel they've gained going into this game?

COACH FERENTZ: I know this: Northwestern is very proficient and has been for a long time with this offense. They really do a nice job. Like I said, they're playing really smart on defense. Their players understand what they're supposed to do. They're pretty good. They've got a quarterback who is a veteran player. They've got a runningback who hurts you in the running game, he hurts you in the passing game. It's going to be a heck of a challenge for us to try to match up against their guys. They're high-effort players, too. They do everything right. That's probably why they're 4-0 right now. They're really doing a good job.

Q. Just like the fact with your defense, given the fact that your defense has gone up against this before.

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think there's anything magical about spreads versus Wisconsin, Michigan State attacks. It's still about how you play against those players, individuals. For instance, Edds might be taking on a receiver blocking, then next week or whenever, just down the road, he's taking on a tight end more in the game. You still have to be able to play off blocks, take care of your responsibilities in the passing game. Certainly the percentages get turned a little bit depending on who you're playing. Still gets down to being able to handle your responsibility out in the field being sound.

The one common denominator is that you have to tackle well. That showed up and hurt us in a couple place, one in particular. That really hurt us. Those things really add up. If you let somebody in the end zone, you don't have a chance to fight for another day. That's a bad thing. That hurt us a little bit on a couple touchdowns last week.

Q. You had to come back at Northwestern last year. Looked like an emotional win at the end of the game for the team. Does any of that come into play this week, just kind of remembering what last year felt like?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think probably

the bigger picture, we just lost, and we wanted to win. They just won. I know they want to win, too. It's probably about as simple as that for us. Pertinent to Northwestern, what comes to the mind for me are the last three games, and we're on the short end. 1-2 score on that one. We got outplayed in both of those games. We got outplayed in the first half last year. Those things are factors. And then one of the reasons we were able to get back in the game last year, we got their corners to bite a little bit on a couple double moves. That's what I was alluding to earlier. I'm not seeing them playing that fashion this year. I think they've learned. It's clear to me they're not giving up the big play. That victimized them last year. That's probably one of the reasons they're 4-0 right now. They're not doing that. They're playing very well, statistically, defensively. If you're not giving up big plays, you give yourself a chance to get some things accomplished, and that's what they're doing.

Q. If Shonn is not 100% game shape yet, as a coach do you have to worry about running him too much?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we're keeping an eye on things. It's not like there's a big governor on us right now. It's not a huge factor. We're trying to be smart with him. Then the other thing, he's a physical runner. Some guys you just can't get hits on. Fred Russell is tough to get a direct shot on him. Shonn gives a few and takes a few. So we're trying to be cognizant of that, too, just be smart about what we're doing with him.

Q. An announcer said during the broadcast Saturday, but it had to do with talent, that Shonn is running kind of angry. Did you see that at all?

COACH FERENTZ: Shonn, he's a determined player. That's good in any position. He's doing a great job out there. I'm not sure that's like related to him missing last year. I don't know. If it is, then that's one positive of a guy missing a year. Hopefully don't have to pay that price with too many more players. That's part of the reason we got ChiC here to help us out here.

Q. Has it crossed your mind where the offense would be right now had he not made it back?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I didn't think about that. I didn't think about our plane crashing the other day either. That could have happened. I

try to avoid topics like that. I have enough things that are bringing me down. I don't need that. No, I haven't thought about that one. Thanks for bringing it up, though. Have a nice day (laughter).

Q. What do you think of your offense protection at wide receiver?

COACH FERENTZ: As I said the other day, I think our passing game clearly needs to improve. It's as simple as that. That's a team thing. Just like our sacks, it all goes together. We've got to make some strides there. The good news is we're doing some things in the running game that are better than they were a year ago. I have no idea how we are statistically passing compared to last year. I haven't really paid attention to that.

Just from my sense of things, I know we got to get better. I just know we got to get better. That's everybody, again. That's not just one guy. That's everybody. If we're going to evolve into a good offensive team, that's got to be part of the equation.

Q. Is that the biggest weakness, the passing game?

COACH FERENTZ: I just said it's an area I think we're doing well in the running game. We can do better there, too. But I think our passing game needs to come on a little bit. 'Biggest weakness' would be your choice of words. I wouldn't use it. But I think we need to improve there.

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