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An Interview With:

HEAD COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: First of all, welcome to everybody. We're certainly excited about getting going here. Last time we were here it was after recruiting. And obviously a lot has happened since then. We've had a really good winter program, I know Chris and his staff are really pleased with the way things went and now we're just coming off a break here.

We had our NFL day on Monday. I think all the guys in the senior class did a nice job of helping themselves, representing themselves well. We've got a clinic this weekend to finish up with the weekend. We'll start practice today and have several hundred coaches here this weekend. Good lineup of high school speakers, a couple of guys from our staff will speak and then Bill O'Brien will be the headliner on Friday night. And Bill did a wonderful job I think in a very challenging circumstance in Penn State and moved on to the NFL. We're thrilled to get him back, he's a tremendous coach. And I think everyone will enjoy hearing from him and the other clinicians.

And just to follow up on Steve, we're excited about going back to Central Iowa in April and people at Valley just did a tremendous job of hosting us, we really appreciated that. We're excited about going back there. It's a chance for us to reach out a little bit to the people that travel to Kinnick for so many Saturdays over the fall. That gives us a way to take the product to them a little bit. We're excited about that.

Getting on to football, it's our next phase today, starting spring practice. Like every coach, I'm sure, we're all very eager to get back on the field and work with our players again. Looking forward to an opportunity to do that.

The calendar flipped over when we got back after break from the holiday season. It's a new season, and a lot of new challenges, a lot of new opportunities. We're here to get going. Like every year you graduate good players and good people. And now the interesting part is just to see how things move forward and how are guys move forward individually and collectively.

So what we've done thus far is important, certainly, but this is another phase and we're eager to get going.

With that I'll throw it out to questions.

Q. What would you say are your biggest challenges?

COACH FERENTZ: It's twofold, I think. First thing you always think about we were very senior heavy at the linebacker position. So those guys are probably representative of the challenge that we have. We have three guys that not only played very well, they all played at an extremely high level, but the things they did in terms of providing leadership, on the field, off the field, outstanding.

So to me that's where I always start. How are we going to replace those guys that have played such a big role, be it three guys that were pretty prominent, C.J. Fiedorowicz pretty prominent, or a guy like Brett Van Sloten who was a little more under the radar, being an offensive lineman, but such a strong force, attitudinally and in the locker room. Or a guy like Gavin Smith that never started a ballgame, but played a valuable role. It's going to be fun to see who emerges.

We have a lot of guys that are trying to grab the wheel a little bit and take that role. It will be -- we'll know a lot more after 15 workouts. It's something we're looking forward to seeing.

Q. What is your expectations of the linebackers now? How do you bring them along in the sense that you were spoiled by

experience last year, and now maybe a little more patience is required?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think so. I think part of the biggest thing we got done talking a little while ago. But the biggest thing especially in the initial stages is to encourage guys to play aggressive. Not be afraid to make a mistake. Because we're not going to lose a game this spring. That's something -- not that we're not going to work towards that end, but it's not a crisis situation, if somebody blows an assignment or a coverage, at this point of the year.

But we want to identify guys as they cut it loose a little bit and see what they look like. Most players look different each phase. They ought to look different than they did back in December.

The big thing is to cut it loose and we'll worry about those details later on.

Q. The secondary, you've got Lomax at safety, what's prompted you to go that route with him as opposed to keeping him at corner?

COACH FERENTZ: As you know, Jordan last year was one of our starters in the opening ballgame. He had some injuries that he had had to deal with and unfortunately had another one.

He's a guy that's been in our program little bit. We've liked what we've seen of him, obviously. The fact that he was going to start or did start our opening game. He's got some of the traits that you look for in safety, too. He's a physical player, he's very intelligent, he's been an honor student since he's been here, and communicative that way. I think he's got some traits that we've seen other safeties or good safeties that we've had. We worked with him last year at that position. Seemed like he took to it pretty naturally. Seems like right now he's the best person for that job. All the jobs right now are up for contention. We'll see what happens. Those are the things we saw.

Q. Would you want him to be there permanently or is it something that you avoid a situation like you had a few years back?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I think we're thinking more permanent. And I think we have guys at the corner position that look like they're going to have a chance to develop. One thing affects the other, there's no doubt about that. You never know. That's the fun of spring, and we'll see how things develop.

Q. How different a feeling do you have for Jake this year compared to last year?

COACH FERENTZ: I think anything, whether you're practicing in August or spring practice, and spring practice is even a better example, usually. You have a lot of different players at different levels. You have redshirt players that haven't been on the game field yet. Expectations for those guys aren't necessarily the same as the guy that's been a one-year starter.

And the first thing I think about with Jake last year is going into the year, both he or C.J., we didn't know -- you don't know necessarily about their physical toughness, how they're going to handle getting banged around a little bit. Our quarterbacks don't get hit in practice.

And then obviously the highs and lows of the season, how do they deal with those things. We know a lot more about him now. Obviously our expectation level for him is going to be different than for a guy that hasn't played.

For the guys that have played, and Jake did an awful lot of good things last year, obviously we want them to be better players this year. We expect the same thing out of Scherff. We expect him to be a better lineman than he was a year ago. If they're not, then we're probably not doing our jobs right and they're not doing theirs right.

Q. You could have 9 or 10 running backs on scholarship, do you see any of those guys moving there?

COACH FERENTZ: There really hasn't been a discussion at this point. Mark Weisman has flexibility being a fullback and running back. But hopefully it's a good problem. Hopefully it ends up being a crowded position, we'll see. I think it has the potential for that. I think the other part is they all have -- they have some different packages that they offer. We'll kind of fool around with that this spring and see what it looks like, too.

Q. What have you seen from Sean Welsh?

COACH FERENTZ: He did a lot of good things last year. He made the assimilation pretty -- I don't want to say effortlessly, but he picked things up quickly and did a lot of good things. Do we list him as a starter? But he's a guy in contention. And he's behind the other four guys. Those guys have played. So that job is really wide open. Not that the other ones aren't, but Sean

certainly is a guy who impressed us. But a lot of other guys competing, Eric Simmons will be in there competing, and we'll change some guys around and see what they can do.

Q. You talked a lot last year about familiarity with Greg, You have eight starters returning on offense?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it's a combination of those two things, and then not having a new quarterback, too. For James Vanderberg two years ago it was kind of like being a new quarterback even though he was experienced because we were all learning on the run.

And so I think everybody has assimilated to the way Greg does things offensively. We do have a quarterback that's returning, and probably one of our more experienced offensive groups coming back, with still obviously some things to get resolved. But hopefully it's a more fluid operation, more productive operation than we've had over the last few years and I think it will be.

Q. You have redshirt freshmen wide receivers coming on. Greg last year talked about using the wide receivers a little more. Is that coming to fruition with all these new guys?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, probably have to go back to December. That was the nice thing about December, watching those guys do some work. And especially in our offensive system. We liked what we saw, and I think we're on the right path right now. That being said we don't know how they're going to react to audibles, coverage changing, so this will be a really important step for those guys. I think the potential there for the group is good. And we're excited about that and hopefully they can show they'll pick things up pretty quickly and play at a winning level.

Q. You talked about Weisman and what you can do with him. When it comes to being in a rhythm for a back?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think so. I don't think it's a big deal. In Mark's case, he runs so hard, so physical as a player, the caution with him is just over doing it with him. We've done that in the past. Last year we kind of had to pull back to get him back to where he was going at an effective rate. If you don't pull him back, he won't. He's one of those guys.

To me it's a good thing right now. It's a good situation.

Q. Last year you were able to establish a physical tone. What's with the record around, you won close games. Can you think of a better scenario where you had a better bounce back type of season from where you were to where you are and where you are today?

COACH FERENTZ: Last year was a positive step, for sure. And it was disappointing two years ago. We moved on and went back to work was kind of our theme. And really that's what we have to do now.

The games we won last year, with a lot of close victories, but those things can turn so quickly. You look at the NCAA basketball stuff, too, it's such a fine line, I think in most college sports right now, that you've got to start first things first.

We have a lot of work to do with this team right now to even think about taking on our schedule right now. So we've got to focus on that.

But the good news is we have an opportunity, I think it's been that way most years since I've been here, we've had an opportunity to have a good football team. But the important thing for our players is to understand we've got a lot of work to do. There's nothing we can assume.

You look back to our opening game in '09, comes to mind right away. We were -- it was amazing that we got out with a victory and end up in the Orange Bowl. Every step is so important right now. We've just got to worry about what we do in the next four weeks, five weeks.

Q. You talked about robbing from the offensive line stack of scholarships. Was that more to -- you brought in four wide receivers last year --

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah. Especially going back two years ago. We felt like we had to bring in a group of receivers. That was an area that needed to be addressed. And I think we're gaining ground there, now. We'll know more at the end of spring here, see how the guys perform. But I think we've created some really good competition at those positions, and we've kind of cheated the line, a little bit, if you will.

The guys that we've offered have done a pretty good job. And the guys that have come in.

But that's in my mind right now. We've got to get a little more balance there. And this year, it just kind of ended up that way where we knew we had to get some linebackers, obviously. We probably went one or two over the DB position, but there were some guys that had an interest in us that we thought were really good players. If you have some guys up there that you like, sometimes you go that direction and try to catch up maybe the next year. We'll try to get it in balance at some point, we're going to have to.

Q. What about Travis and Reggie and some of the other guys that are going to get their first chances to make a shot?

COACH FERENTZ: You know, in some ways they're all pretty similar. They have different stories. Reggie is a true freshman that we opted to play a little bit kind of the Drew Ott story, if you will. The difference being he got to play on special teams. And that turn down package. He got a lot of work.

But really impressed us in practice. And we felt it was worth the trade off of taking his redshirt off.

Travis has been steady since he's gotten here. And worked hard, great attitude, and been a very, very outstanding special teams player, not only in terms of activity but his attitude that he brings. He's been on the field a significant amount.

Quinton is a guy a year ago at this time I wasn't sure where that was going. Quite frankly based on the year before that. He had a really good spring. And had an outstanding fall. If James wasn't here last year, I thought to have all the confidence in the world he would have played really well, and got positioned behind a very good player. But the transformation he's made in 12 months gives you a lot of confidence.

That being said none of the three of them have really starred out and played 60, 70, 80 snaps a game. That's the hurdle we've got to climb now. But that's the way it goes.

Q. How do you Kornbrath will respond to a battle?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, and every one of our guys on the roster, basically, is in the competition. Outside of maybe Kluver, I'm not sure who our backup snapper is right now. But we'll have somebody in the fall. Right now if he's not here, if he gets the flu, we may not kick that day.

But basically everybody has got competition. I think that's a good thing. I think players want that. Players want to compete.

Q. How are you guys injury-wise, or position changes, anything there?

COACH FERENTZ: Nothing really dramatic. Injury wise have a couple of guys with nagging stuff.

Q. Nobody that's going to be out for spring?

COACH FERENTZ: Not off the top of my head. No, not really. Some guys are limited, but still be out there working, at least.

Q. Would you rather have a returning linebacker or returning defensive line?

COACH FERENTZ: What did I say? Probably both. I don't like to be greedy. It doesn't work out that way, usually. But at least we have experience up front. We have some guys that are coming, and that's encouraging. The linebackers, they've been on the field. We have to figure out the equation.

Q. How is the return game?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, there may be some freshmen involved there, too. We'll take a look at a lot of guys this spring. Pick some guys in the receiving pool and running back pool that come to mind, and see how it pans out. I think we'll be okay there.

Q. Any roster changes?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm trying to think who, basically those two guys and Mike Malloy has left the team. I don't know if that's out. He has left the team. He's still in school.

Q. Have you had a chance to think about the new western division, a lot more geography, resumes a lot of those rivalries. Now what do you think?

COACH FERENTZ: That's about as far as I've gone on it. I think going back to the expansion we all knew it was going to be not uncomfortable, but different. And the thing that worked out to be a little bit not odd, but not playing Illinois, not playing Wisconsin, seemed -- it was different. But that was part of the expansion. I would imagine our fans first and foremost are happier to have the ability to

jump in the car and get to the opponent's stadiums a little easier. Personally I like it, and I like that concept, that idea. But it's tough when you're trying to -- how do you make an equation of 14 work perfectly. It's hard, same thing when we went to 12.

Q. Along those lines you're not going to be playing Ohio State or Michigan or Penn State on regularity. They're kind of the test for a lot of programs if you can get past them you've kind of proved yourself. Does that take away a little bit?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I go back to our opening game in '09, we had quite a test there. So every week is a test. I don't know what you can do about it or how you -- I know this, there are a lot of teams on this side, too, that are playing well. And just look at the history of the Championship game right now. Some of the teams you mentioned haven't been there, Michigan State has, obviously. But the teams that have been playing, Wisconsin has won two, Michigan State has won one.

Every year is a different equation. You never know who is going to be the toughest teams. Again, such a fine line type thing. I haven't worried too much about it.

I will say this, I looked up somewhere during the winter months about the schedule the next three or four years, and it is kind of different. It's weird when you are not playing teams that you mentioned or other teams. It's going to be different. We've never traveled to Maryland, at least not since I've been here, never traveled to New Jersey to play games, outside of the Kickoff Classic back in the 80's. That's going to be a little bit different for us. A little different flavor. Certainly not the same.

Q. Have you devised almost a different approach for nonconference, now that you're going to have more games in conference, has that altered?

COACH FERENTZ: Our philosophy for a long time is to play two CFB conference teams. Now to me all that happened is one of those two is going to be a Big 10 opponent. The trick was to make sure that we have that extra home game, get the Iowa State series to correlate with that, we didn't lose a home game there against those teams. To me it was just a trade off. Probably made our scheduling easier in some ways. But the

argument is somebody is going to have an unfair advantage, four and five, in conference play. You can't win that battle.

Q. Probably hard to gauge how much Damond Powell has grown, with the play book and all that stuff, even to now, or can you? Fans got a taste of him and they loved it.

COACH FERENTZ: We're here to see what it looks like. He's very intriguing in that basically he showed up here in August. He got here a couple of days before we got started. He literally was brand new and all regards. He's got real energy to him. He's a very vivacious guy and high energy player. He really -- it's been fun just to watch him in the out of season program. He looks like a college player now, instead of a skinny kid. I'm sure it's the first time he trained with any regularity. My guess is he's just like Bob Sanders, he's probably just played ball all the time. And now he's actually doing it in a structured way. We're here to see what he does out on the field in the spring.

Q. Do you see him playing an expanded role?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I would hope he could do more. Yeah, sure, hope he could. But we'll see what he does.

Q. Always comes up with just moving Damon Bullock out to the slot and using him more. Do you see that?

COACH FERENTZ: He can do that. I think go back to Albert Young, Albert had that ability, too, he was comfortable out there. And I'm not a receiver coach or back field coach. But some guys just are a little bit more adept at doing things without -- that you don't have to explain the ABC's quite to the same extent. And some guys aren't as fluent doing it. But he's always done that pretty fluently and he handles it mentally, too, it's not an issue for him. I think that's something he can certainly do.

Q. Parker or Wadley, do they give you that opeion?

COACH FERENTZ: We're going to see what they can do. I don't think we know as much about those two guys. Eager to get them on the field. Different type backs than Mark or LeShun.

Q. Rudock would be the guy?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not going to say, it's just like last year, because it's not just like last year in that it is they'll both compete. And Nick is fairly behind those guys, certainly. But C.J. did a lot of good things last year, and I'd expect him to be a better player this spring than he was a year ago. We'll let those guys compete and it should be great competition. They're both competitive guys. They're both good football players, and we're thrilled they're both on our team.

Q. You talked a bit about LeShun Daniels, he arrived on campus last summer. And kind of walked in. How much outward mobility exists with him in that position?

HEAD COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, we've never had too many good players in any position, I hope we do at some point. The way he's carrying himself now, he's grown little bit. Especially the guys that are -- just had their first fall here, it's a big turning point. It's probably that way on every campus, once the guys get the routine of going to college. One of the reasons we played him last year is he seemed to handle pretty much everything in stride, didn't seem to be overwhelmed at any given time. And eager to see him on the field, we'll probably see a guy that's even more confident, more decisive. He's really had a good winter, worked hard. He's a guy that always seems to be very upbeat and just likes football. We're eager to watch him.

Q. You kind of go back to what you did before where you mostly played two guys or where you look to still get everybody involved because you have four of the five returning?

COACH FERENTZ: I think all four of those guys will play. And I think they'll all have roles. We like to play multiple tight ends. We only like to do it if you have guys that you can put in it. Jon Wisnieski is an intriguing guy, he had a nice month of December. He fits right in with that other group from what we saw. It's going to be fun to see what they do.

We won't have C.J. and he was an outstanding football player, and I think he'll play a long time moving forward. We'll have enough guys in that group. Somebody has to make those catches in the red zone and some of those things that C.J. did well, too.

Q. Compare him to past tight ends you had.

COACH FERENTZ: Well, you know, they're all kind of different stories. Dallas Clark is a different player than C.J., almost totally different. But to find guys that have the ability to block like C.J. does, it's kind of interesting to me, because that was not his forte in high school, he was more of a wideout, actually.

But I have people that come through -- the thing about him, he was always willing and worked hard in practice, and developed into a really good blocker. There's a lot of value in that because it's hard to find guys that will do that. And he's got good skills as a receiver and a great target, especially in the red zone. Tough to cover that guy.

I think he's got a lot of upside. But a different player than Dallas or even -- think about Chandler, different type of guy there, too. So it's all fun -- there are a lot of different styles of players that play well.

Q. Andrew had to step into some pretty big shoes. You guys had a pretty good run at right tackle?

COACH FERENTZ: Andrew is a player that we think is better suited to play tackle and he did a good job at guard. And both he and Brandon when they got hurt a year ago, I think it was October, I'm pretty sure it was October, that was tough on both those guys. Obviously they had to go through the rehab and all that stuff. And Andrew's lingered a little bit longer. It impedes development. And all of us felt in November things started happening for him. Fortunately last year worked out really well and he played well for us when he was in there. I think he's ready to -- we have all the confidence in the world he'll play well for us. I don't think he's overwhelmed at all. He's excited about it, and I think he's totally comfortable out in that position.

Q. How important is it that your staff remains intact? How do you feel in your ability to compete given the almost exponential growth of the system?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, it's -- on the staff, itself, we went through a period here as I said before, we had a two-year transition, if you will, both with Norm's retirement and then Ken going to Miami. So we've kind of reinvented ourselves in

some way, if you will. I feel like we're up for the next decade. But that's the way I'm looking at it. We've got a group that really came together really quickly last spring. I was amazed, pleased with just how well everybody meshed during spring practice, not only coaches and coaches, but players and coaches. The whole thing ran smoothly.

Moving forward I'm excited about the group we have. They're a great group of guys, and they work really well with our players. We'd like to keep them altogether forever. But it doesn't work that way. Guys retire. And sometimes guys leave, Ron Aiken left, and good things have happened to him. That's part of the game.

Overall you still want a stable environment for your players. And for players I think it's healthy, when they get recruited they know what they're going to go to. We try to be as transparent, that's a big popular word nowadays, we try to be as clear as possible about what it is we expect when a player comes here, and what they're going to have to do and how hard it is. It is hard to be a Division 1 athlete in any sport. People don't realize just how hard it is. We try to be really clear about that.

But it's nice when the players get here and they know -- what they heard and what they saw is going to be in place throughout their entire career. It's not that you change this or change that. But philosophically I don't think we're looking for our identity. We have a good idea of who we are and what we want to do. To keep everybody in the coaching staff and support staff being on the same page, we're here to try to help them get some things accomplished.

Q. Nico Law is a senior, and he's been right around starter his whole career. How do you keep a guy like that engaged? I know the contribution can come at any time?

COACH FERENTZ: Sure. First of all, nothing has been established. He's welcome to beat Johnny out. It could be he beats Jordan Lomax out and Johnny goes to free safety. So that's something we all talk about as a staff. Our job is to get the best 11 guys out there on any situation. So that's what the players expect and want. It's fair to want that and they want to compete.

At the end of the day not everybody is going to start. That's the reality of college football. But the best guys -- guys have to earn it on the field, that's what it's all about.

We're starting over from scratch right now. Again, Brandon Scherff to me is our -- he was our team MVP last year, says a lot about our team, but I expect him to practice, and he will. I know he will. He'll practice harder than anybody out there. That's what guys should do and compete and get as good as they can get.

Q. Having the extra month of practice this year through the bowl game to see some of the younger guys, how much further along are some of the younger guys this year compared to last year that you didn't have it?

COACH FERENTZ: The silver lining last year was that we got extra weeks of training. You have to spin it somehow and make it a positive. But obviously prefer to be on the field. Still training when not practicing a little bit. It was good to get an exposure to some players you don't necessarily get to see during the season. So it's a really great learning experience for those guys. Hopefully they'll be further ahead today when we hit the field than they would be had we not been out there.

Q. Carl Davis and Louis Trinca-Pasat how healthy are they now?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think Louis is not Matt Kroul, but he's a Matt Kroul-type guy, in that he flies under the radar, but what he adds to our team is so valuable, it's not the same as Brett Van Sloten, but kind of like that that everybody has such strong respect for Louis. He took his lumps two years ago. But last year he played really well. Obviously we expect that.

And I talked about the way Scherff does things. Louis is the same kind of guy.

And that was a huge step for Carl to get out there and play. I think he learned a lot about himself and now he's got higher expectations than he did a year ago, for sure. That's the nice thing about playing and learning that he can do this, but also he can be even better if he worked at it. He better understands how to work it than he did a year ago. That's experience. That's something that's hard to just hand a guy. They have to go through that to learn that.

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