

September 30, 2008



An interview with:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome, everybody. We're anxious to get this week started. Certainly it was a disappointing weekend last weekend. Got things we need to work on and clean up certainly. No different than a week ago. That's the task that's at hand right now.

Our captains this week will be King and Kroul this week on defense, and Bruggeman and Greene again on offense. Same four guys as a week ago.

Injury-wise I think we're in fairly good shape right now. Paki O'Meara is probably the only guy that looks like he's not going to make it. We'll see how that goes. I think that will be a longshot to see him at the end of the week. We'll see how it develops.

We got quite a challenge in our football team's hands this weekend certainly going up to Michigan State. Basically two challenges: playing on the road first of all, then secondly, playing a very good team, a well-coached team, a team that's having good success.

Playing well offensively with a couple veteran players kind of running the attack, if you will. Hoyer has played very, very well for them for quite some time. Very poised player. You got to start with Ringer when you talk about their offensive football team. He's just an outstanding player. We saw a great runningback last weekend in Simmons. Say the same thing with respect Ringer, a tremendous player, a tremendous runningback. Big, big part of what they do.

They're very good up front. Very big and talented. Good receivers, what have you. Defensively they're experienced on defense. Very active, very athletic. You know, they'll keep us

busy, give us plenty of challenges. That's the task at hand. We'll get started this afternoon.

Q. So Shonn is okay?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll be out there today. He'll be practicing, yeah.

Q. How about Tyler Sash?

COACH FERENTZ: I think he's got a chance to come back. He's going to practice today. Hopefully we'll go through the week, have him back with us.

Q. His injury---?

COACH FERENTZ: No. He got an injury up above there, yeah.

Q. These two teams mirror each other, don't they?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, there's some parallels. They've got more wins than we do, that's one difference. But, yeah, I think at least -- it's not quite looking in the mirror, but a little bit alike, yeah. They play with tight ends on the field, fullbacks, all that kind of stuff. So that part's interesting. They certainly are committed to running the football, do a great job. As I mentioned before, Hoyer is a good quarterback. You can't just load up either.

Q. Talk about the wide receivers' play. Has it progressed the way you wanted it to going into this season?

COACH FERENTZ: We made strides last week. I was pleased about that. I think we did some good things there. I thought that was probably our best outing as a group. One of the things I would mention, and Saturday's indicative of that, it was their best day blocking. A lot of times you don't make mention of that. Derrell Johnson, Andy, both of them were involved in some big blocks. Any time you get long runs,

that's usually a big part of it.

I walked in last night. The game was over. But I did see Hines Ward being interviewed on ESPN. Boy, you want to talk about a receiver that blocks. I was there a couple years ago. I asked their receiver coach how he got his guys to block so well. He said, You got a guy like Hines Ward, it's easy. He kind of leads the progression there, takes pride in it.

I thought our guys made some real steps last week. Derrell. Shonn had one. Wasn't so pretty, but at least he got the job done. That's encouraging. I thought we did a little bit better in the passing game, too, which was a positive step for us.

Q. How helpful is it having seen Javon Ringer before?

COACH FERENTZ: It would be better if we didn't see him again, you know. Be nice if he was a senior a year ago, but he's not.

So I don't know how helpful it is. I guess if you don't believe the tape, seeing him is believing him certainly. But he's just an excellent football player. You just hope a guy like that doesn't break your back during the course of a game, because he's certainly capable of it.

Q. Do he and Shonn compare to each other's styles?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if I'd compare them exactly. They've got the same numbers, obviously. They're both good at what they do. But, yeah, he's a little different. But an excellent football player.

Q. Is Shonn's style built for longevity?

COACH FERENTZ: I hope it is. We'll find out. Looked pretty good for five games. I have no reason to think he won't be fine. I wouldn't call him Earl Campbell. But Earl Campbell played pretty physically. Used to get 16 plus games out of him in a year, what have you. Shonn's a strong runner. He's not timid out there at all. But we don't have any concerns there, huh-uh.

Q. Would you call his running style "upright?"

COACH FERENTZ: No, I wouldn't. I think he gets his pads down. The backs will get caught upright. The one he got hit on the other day, the guy had him unfortunately. If a guy gets stood up, you're vulnerable to getting hit pretty good.

Q. Was that a helmet-to-helmet call?

COACH FERENTZ: Somebody asked that on the radio call-in show. But I think that's one where probably you need to go back and look at.

There are two things that have come up this year, I won't go into the other thing, but two things that have come up that probably could use some addressing right now. To me the helmet-to-helmet thing, based on what I've seen this year, and some have gone for us, some have gone against us. It's a little bit like the facemask 15, five-yard penalty, intentional, unintentional. I guess when I think of helmet-to-helmet, I think of spearing, things where you're really putting somebody in danger, trying to intentionally put somebody in danger, or, you know, a flagrant hit. I've seen a couple this year that have been called that. I think it's tough coaching tackling right now. I think it's tough to officiate tackling. That's just my observation.

Q. How frustrating were those fumbles last week, given that Northwestern took two of them for really big touchdowns?

COACH FERENTZ: Turnovers are usually a bad thing. And certainly Saturday, you don't have to look any further to get a good illustration of how harmful they can be, particularly uncontested turnovers really hurt you. We had a couple of those the other day.

So uncontested turnovers are kind of like flagrant personal fouls, hitting a guy late or out of bounds. They normally really hurt you in the end of the day. You look back and say, boy, that was costly. It's one of those things, if we don't clean that up, we're going to pay the consequence, as we did Saturday.

Q. Turnovers aside Saturday, do you feel your offense played well enough? If they play that well Saturday, you got a shot?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll give ourselves a chance to win football games. We're certainly further ahead than we were last year at any given point offensively. We're a better team offensively potentially. But part of that equation is taking care of the ball. That's one thing we did well. We didn't do much well last year, but we were good in the ball security department. That part of equation we have to figure out, or our statistics will look good and our win/loss column won't look good. I'd rather have both, to be greedy. But if you can only have

one, you'd rather win games.

That's certainly a big thing we're going to have to do a better job of. As everybody knows, two of the turnovers came on special teams the other day, too. That's part of the equation. But they all add up and they all hurt you.

Q. Anything you do to make the guys focus in, the return guys, sleep with the ball maybe?

COACH FERENTZ: I hadn't thought of that. Yeah, that might be an idea. If it helps, I'm all for it. I'll just leave that one right there, I guess, before I get in trouble.

But, to me it boils down to concentration. What you're saying is an illustration of the old carry a ball with you all around campus, what have you. But it still gets down to concentration like a lot of things. Like personal fouls, too, usually that's a concentration thing. So, we just have to do a better job. Have to do a better job.

Q. Is the plan to go with Rick most of the game again this week and just see where it kind of takes you or is he going to play the entire game?

COACH FERENTZ: You never say never. We'll just see how the game goes. Our plan is to start him and play him, pretty much like it was last week.

Q. Rick got his first real chance at a tight fourth quarter situation. How would you evaluate that performance?

COACH FERENTZ: I thought minus the turnovers his performance was pretty good for the most part. I thought he did a lot of very positive things. The bad news is we couldn't execute well enough in the last four plays. The good news is he got us to that point, which to get us there, he showed an awful lot on that drive I thought.

You know, we're making progress. Now we have to learn how to finish it up. I mean, you could argue that to be in that situation after turning the ball over five times, that's pretty good. But it still wasn't good enough. What they did was good enough and what we didn't do wasn't, so it's pretty simple.

I think I said the other day, it's almost impossible to win with five turnovers. I think a team turned around and did it. About an hour after we lost our game, somebody else did it. So so much for that one. Shows you I'm an authority on a lot of subjects.

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Q. Do you think about shaking up your kickoff return at all?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think about shaking up a lot of things. I thought we did that last weekend. It backfired a little bit. But we're clearly not happy with where we are right now. I mean, , that goes without saying.

Q. Is that a product of young guys back there, Jewel?

COACH FERENTZ: I think Jewel is doing a great job back there. So I'll say that and I'll leave it right there. I think Jewel is doing a great job. I wish we had two of them.

Q. How much confidence do you have in Jewel?

COACH FERENTZ: With Paki out, he's number two. I think he's making steps every week, so he's gaining our trust with each week, and that's real important. We're going to need all three guys, Jewel and Paki and Shonn. That's one of the positives that's taken place. There have been a couple positives the last couple weeks, and I think that's one of them. I think he's progressed. The run he made in front of their bench was really a quality run. It was a tough run. He did some other things, too.

So I think he's moving along.

Q. Is the thought with Shonn to just keep giving it to him, hope he's still fresh at the end of the year?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm a dumb line coach, but Ronnie Harmon was a big part of our offense in the '80s. If you get a quality player, which we think Shonn is, we're certainly going to use him. We're not going to abuse him or misuse him, but we're going to use him. I mean, we'll try to be smart. I think we've tried to do that so far.

But, we're going to play him extensively, just like Michigan State plays Ringer. You've got to feature your best guys.

Q. Is that sort of a Catch-22 with runningbacks?

COACH FERENTZ: If you look around the country the guys that are up top statistically, and I haven't looked, but it's usually that way every year, usually they get a lot of carries, make a lot of yards. It's usually a common denominator.

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So it's not like we're trying to pace here. We want him ready to go in the fourth quarter, then we worry about next week next week. It's kind of that way with our whole team.

Q. From the outside it seems like the optimism for this season has really shifted in the last two weeks with two losses.

COACH FERENTZ: That's what happens when you lose back-to-back games.

Q. How is it inside these doors?

COACH FERENTZ: Only time will tell. We're certainly not strangers to this territory. If you look at us historically, some years have turned out very, very good, some years have turned out average, and others didn't turn out so well. So, there's really no precedent that's been set.

You know, it's basically this season's going to turn out the way we dictate it. That's our job, to make sure that we're pushing forward. We can't worry about what happened last week. Win, lose or draw, we've got to push forward.

Q. How difficult a challenge is that to try to persuade young adults to focus on what's ahead of them, not what's behind them?

COACH FERENTZ: I always like to highlight, we won a couple championships. 2004, you know, we were 2-2, I believe, and just got slaughtered in game three. And coincidentally turned it over four times in game four. We ended up playing okay that year. 2002, we had as devastating a loss, kind of hate to rank devastation losses, but that was a tough one. And, you know, we got back from it.

It's part of football, part of sports. If you have disappointment, chances are you're going to experience it during the course of year. I wouldn't rate it better at the front or better in the middle or better at the end. But, you know, no matter what it is you're doing, you've got to work on getting -- not lett what happened yesterday disturb you. You've got to push forward and try to perform that day and try to improve. And that's where our focus has to stay, no matter what we're doing.

So it is a challenge. It's a challenge every year. It's a different challenge every year. But I think we've got good character on our team. I don't think, I know we have good character. And we're getting good leadership. So those are two things that give you cause for optimism.

And there's things we're seeing on tape that we're optimistic about and seeing on the

practice field, too. You know, you can only go off experience. And that's all I can do. I've seen things pan out pretty well; I've seen things pan out sort of well; and then have things haven't panned out. But I certainly think we have more potential than we had in '99 or 2000. I'll throw that out there. And I think we have more potential than we had last year.

There's no guarantees. I don't know how strong our opposition is past this week. So no way to predict it. If we do our jobs this week, it ought to be a real good football game this weekend and we'll see what happens after that.

Q. In the course of people's lives, sometimes something happens yesterday, you tend to dwell, it can shape you today and tomorrow. Football seems to be the mentality not to let that be.

COACH FERENTZ: I think if you don't develop that mentality in sports, you're going to lose a lot of games, you're going to experience a lot of disappointment, as a player or a coach. That's just how it works. So, you know, experience teaches you that.

You know, that's a challenge. But, you know, you got to learn from your past, just like anything you do in life. I mean, who hasn't screwed things up in their lives? You learn from it and you try like heck not to repeat it, knowing there are always going to be challenges out there. That's a mentality you have to establish and develop. If you can't, then you probably ought to get out of sports for sure, because it can be a tough, tough, bumpy road.

Q. Is leadership the difference in these circumstances?

COACH FERENTZ: It sure helps. The more of it you have, the better off you are. I think character's a big thing, too. I've always believed that. Teams that have high character tend to endure tougher times better than teams that, you know, are a little wishy-washy or a little shallow. You know, that usually shows up in your record, in general terms, general terms.

Q. You'll see what kind of leadership your team has?

COACH FERENTZ: You see it every weekend. The other challenge, we're not talking about this one right now, but when you're on a run,

doing well, that's a different kind of challenge, too. I think that's a slipperier slope, quite frankly. I've experienced both in my life. I think success a lot of times can be more dangerous, if you're not careful. But, good leadership helps you in either case.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about third quarter scoring. Talk about the halftime break.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it was certainly evident the other day. That was by far our worst series defensively. It was almost not a series, if you call that a series. We never even got our hands up. So, maybe we need to, like do log rolls or something coming down that ramp. I'm joking, but I don't know. It's kind of like going to bed with a football. If that helps, I'm all for it.

But, again, I don't know if it's anything different than just, you know, mentally being more conscious of it and aware of it, you know, coming out and starting better. 'Cause we clearly -- you know, boy, that was terrible the other day. We just -- we were sleepwalking and they were humming.

So, I don't know what the answer is there.

Q. The last two weeks, have they brought back any memories of, say, 2001, where this team was one or two plays away from finishing things and really taking off?

COACH FERENTZ: I hadn't thought of it in those terms. But, yeah, I mean, just in general terms, that probably is a good -- yeah, I mean, because coming out of the 2001 year, clearly winning close games, you know, we were close in a lot of regards. That's been in the past, too.

So, yeah, you know, the fundamentals are the fundamentals. The basics are the basics. Usually in close games, which we're hoping the next seven games will be that way, we're going to have to make them that way. It's not like we're going to be favorites in any game I don't think. But in close games, you know, it gets back to just those things you learn, you know, when you're in third grade. Turnovers are big. Special teams are big. Penalties are big. You know, they end up -- the better you can do there, you know, the better you're going to be in the close game as a result. That's really how we're built. You know, we have to do a better job there.

Q. Is there a fine line between sticking with your game plan or switching up things, like doing the log rolling? Is there a fine line

between keep doing what you're doing or switching things up?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, however we choose to get the message across, we have to. I mean, those are messages that we're going to have to try to better communicate. We've already talked about those things, as you might well imagine, on Sunday. You know, how we start a half. And I'd cite you, it's not quite the same, but it's a little bit like it. We showed life with that first drive. We took the ball and drove it. But then we -- point of emphasis last week was doing a better job down inside the 25, coming out with touchdowns. And what do we do? Uncontested turnover, right off the bat. So we lost an opportunity inside the 25. You look back at the end of the game, that was huge. Two weeks ago we get the turnover inside the 15 and come out with a field goal.

So, yeah, those are things that we're talking about. However we get it across, we got to get it across where we're tuning in a little bit better.

Q. Which way do you go? Keep doing what you're doing or try to switch it up?

COACH FERENTZ: I've always been an advocate to trying to educate, better communicate and educate. That's kind of how we've done it in the past. It's worked in the past. Doesn't mean it will work this year, but that's kind of how we approach it. Like I say, maybe log rolling out of the locker room will help, something like that. Cartwheels, Blues Brothers. I don't know. We'll figure something out.

Q. Jeff Tarpinian got on the field for the first time this year. How did he look? He's not on the two-deep right now.

COACH FERENTZ: He did okay. It's fuzzy. I mean, we're rotating guys in and out. He's not obviously in game shape right now, both conditioning or playing, he hasn't had pads on a lot. And we're not talking about like, you know, Greenway in his fourth year or fifth year or Hodge in his fourth or fifth year, we're talking about a guy who's a really good prospect.

But, it's great having him back. He was on our punt team, which is good. He's very good there. And that helps us out. So we'll keep moving him forward. You know, he'll be more and more involved with every week hopefully. I think he's out of the woods. I don't want to say he is, but

I think he is.

Q. Just sticking with the linebackers, how pleased have you been with the progression out of Pat and Jeremiha?

COACH FERENTZ: They're doing some good things out there and there are some things that are maybe a little more harder to see that they still need to work on. But they're both playing with good energy and enthusiasm. We're young at that position. We don't have a senior in all three of the groups, you know, the three linebacker positions. So we're making progress. And that's really important.

You know, for the most part we're playing pretty well defensively, give or take a series like I mentioned, or a play here and a play there. But I think we're doing some good things defensively.

Q. Are you getting as much punch out of your front four as you were hoping?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think. You know, again, it's hard to evaluate statistically. But, for instance, if you would just take -- I'll just pick one guy. Take last week's game, look at Mitch King play-by-play. Just focus on him. He really played well. But it doesn't show up statistically because the style of their offense, you know, the ball comes out or they're rolling right and rolling left, all that type of thing. So, it wasn't like he was going to be a huge factor in it. But he's really playing well.

Again, those judgments are hard to make statistically or casually watching the game. But he's playing well. Kind of depends on the game and the situation.

Q. Has the success of Shonn, the offensive line and their play, kind of been overshadowed?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, that's okay. That's okay. They're not there yet. But they're getting better. They're getting better. Doing some good things.

Q. Your front line, is that set?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see how this week goes. But, yeah, I think we're still mixing guys around a little bit, trying to get this settled, that settled. But I think we're making progress. I think they're improving with every time out, which is good to see.

Q. Eubanks going to be back?



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COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, he should be. He should be going today, so... Give us another guy.

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