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An Interview With:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Injury-wise, I think we are in good shape. I think we came out of the game fairly healthy. Captains remain the same. We have got James Vandenberg and James Ferentz offensively; Micah Hyde and James Morris on the defensive side.

It was certainly a tough loss on Saturday. You know, we came in and looked at it on Sunday and made our corrections and we have moved on now to UNI. Had to move fast. UNI has an excellent football team, really since Coach Farley has been there, and going back even further than that. But they have done a great job under Coach Farley for over 12 years, and they have an excellent plan, excellent players.

Those guys do a good job, and I think all you have to do is look back to the 2009 game when we played them. I don't know that we played anybody during the course of that season that played any harder than they do, and that's exactly what you see on their film from last year or this year.

So they are a team that's very well coached. They play with great toughness, great effort and it's going to be a big challenge for us on Saturday.

Q. How concerned are you about your offense?

COACH FERENTZ: We have not scored a lot of touchdowns. That's always a concern. And you know, we are going to have to do a better job of that. We have to do a better job of finishing plays and finishing drives.

Q. Is there any common thread there?



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COACH FERENTZ: No, I think it's pretty much just team execution right now. And you know, we have done a lot of things in practice that are encouraging. I thought we had a good August and were moving forward. I think in time that's going to show up.

Q. Are there things that you guys can do as coaches maybe to loosen things up or help guys that are struggling right now?

COACH FERENTZ: I think you just keep practicing, keep working, and you just have to do a better job of finishing plays or finishing drives.

Q. What's been the difference between the 20s and then when you get down into the red zone?

COACH FERENTZ: Oh, yeah, the field is a little tighter down there. It's a big part of football, offensively and defensively; if you can keep people out of the end zone, obviously it increases your chances and that's something we have done a fairly good job of over the years.

And then flipping it around, just like a week ago, we got down in there and scored field goals. At some point that's going to catch up to you, and Saturday we came up short again. They kept us out of the end zone.

So it's a little tougher circumstance when you get down there, but if you can't master that, you can't have success; it's unrealistic to think that you're going to be a successful football team. But we'll just keep working at it. We have done some good things in practice down there. We just have to keep working to refine things.

Q. Is there a cure or can there be a cure for drops?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think just practice and concentration. You know, it's like anything else, and we certainly dropped too many balls Saturday to expect to win the game.

Q. What were your thoughts on the progress of the offensive line, and was there any regression in the running game?

COACH FERENTZ: It's hard to say yes or no. They did a better job against the run; better run defense probably than what we would have seen two weeks ago. But our protection certainly improved. It wasn't perfect at times and there were times still where James got hit and got pressured, but I think overall it was better.

It's like our whole football team right now, we need to continue to improve, but there were some things in there that were positive. A big part of that and our entire offensive performance right now is just consistency. If you have eight or nine guys doing something really well and a couple other guys breaking down, you end up with a bad player and a no-gain type play. Those are the things. The challenges never really change. It's just a matter of how the team handles those challenges.

Q. There's been so much focus on the struggles of the offense, but it seems that on the other side of the ball, the defense might be coming on a little bit quicker than many expected. What are your thoughts on that unit?

COACH FERENTZ: I thought on the field Saturday, and I felt that way after Sunday after watching tape, I felt like we played better in the second half. We grew defensively. We just have more confidence. We are more decisive in our play, and as a result, probably played a little faster. So that was encouraging.

And then obviously the play that James made down there in the end zone, that was a huge play because if they score there, we are in serious trouble. And not only did he stop the score, but he gave a chance to do something with it.

And that's the next step, too, for our team; to take advantage of opportunities. We did that two weeks ago in the fourth quarter, really took advantage of a good opportunity and didn't do that, basically twice Saturday in the fourth quarter. We got the ball up there in a good field position, and then went out on downs and moved it on the two-minute drill and then didn't finish that drive.

So those are the steps we have to do, but I thought we grew defensively and made some improvement. But there's still a lot of things on the film that we have to get better at and things that UNI is looking at right now that they are going to

test us on, and if we are not better Saturday, it will show up.

Q. UNI's quarterback, a freshman in FCS football, are you impressed with what you've seen from him?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know about surprised but I'm awfully impressed; I think all of us are, for a first-year starter. That was his first game experience two weeks ago up in Madison.

We have all been there. That's a tough place to go under any circumstance. For a first-year player to go up there and play the way he did, particularly in the second half, that says a lot about him. He's a very impressive young guy. Different quarterback than they have had a year ago, certainly. And they do a nice job of playing to their strength.

So he's a good thrower, an adequate runner; not a bad runner, but he's a better thrower than runner probably and, boy, he did a really nice job up there. So that was really impressive. He gave their team a chance to win, or helped lead them to a point where they had a chance to win the ballgame.

Q. Do you think any of your true freshman receivers will be used or is it a week-by-week thing?

COACH FERENTZ: We'll see how it pans out or plans out. We have looked at the guys and we have got a couple guys that we've talked about but we are going to see how things just develop here as we go along. But right now, we are not. We'll see how the week goes, but we are not planning anything dramatic at this point.

Q. Your defense has looked a lot better in the second half of games. How much of that is Phil and his in-game adjustments, and how much is that them just finally being able to see what the other team is doing, as opposed to on film where you don't have much film of teams yet?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's probably more of the latter. Plus we are a young team right now. Guys get the feel of a game, you hope they learn as they go along and things slow down a little bit for them mentally. I think we have seen that the last couple weeks. So, you know, that's encouraging. Making progress there. We are hardly out of the woods but we are making

progress and we did keep them out of the end zone -- I take it back, one touchdown.

Normally if you give up nine points, that's going to be enough to win and it wasn't on Saturday. There's no givens on anything, but that's encouraging at least.

Q. James Vandenberg, was he a little hard on himself? He was talking the bullet quite a bit Saturday after the game.

COACH FERENTZ: I think so. I think I said on the teleconference, and I say this with all respect, we have a lot of guys invested, but James is right there at the top. He spends an awful lot of time; has ever since he's gotten here. So he expects a lot from himself, and he's a team guy and maybe too much so at times.

If I have a worry about him, I worry about him putting too much pressure on himself. And it's easy to tell a guy, don't, just play your position, easier said than done. But that's the way he's built. He's so respected because of that. He's extremely tough mentally, and tough physically, and he's an excellent football player.

Nobody's happy about the production we have had so far. But all you can do is keep pushing and keep working and the biggest thing he has to do is do his part, not try to do too much, because that can affect his performance.

Q. The fact that he is like that, I assume that's got to help the team chemistry.

COACH FERENTZ: Well, yeah, if your quarterback is not like that, he probably shouldn't be playing. I think it's going to be hard for guys to respect anybody that isn't that way. But yeah, just he's built that way, and you know, he's respected by everybody here in the program.

Q. If you feel too much pressure, can that come out on the field, just in the form of decision making?

COACH FERENTZ: Oh, sure. That's a danger. You just let the game come to you; and I'll go back to I guess it would have been the spring of '87 -- I've probably said this before.

We had three guys competing for a job out here. We had McGwire, Hartlieb, Poholsky competing for the job and sometimes you see all those guys trying to force throws and do things too much. And you know, coming out of that spring, the batting order, Hartlieb was third out of the batting order and he ended up being the guy that eventually won the job.

Big part of playing any position is you've got to just try to play within the framework of what it is you're asked to do. You know, trust that everybody else is going to do the same thing.

Q. Is that the hard part when things are not working right, you press?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it's natural. It happens. You know, we are not the most experienced group right now, so I think the experienced guys feel like they have to do a little bit more and there's a fine line. They do have to do more; they have got to be playing the best, because it's only fair to assume they are going to play their best. But yeah, if you push too hard, sometimes -- I haven't golfed in, you know, like 12 years, but you squeeze a golf club, that's not a good thing. I did figure that out. I just never learned how to figure it out.

Q. You've seen already this year, five FCS teams beat FBS teams; what is it in college football that these games are not gimmies anymore like they used to be maybe 15, 20 years ago?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not aware what the scores are, but again, two games, all we have to do is look at, we just go back to 2009, in effect, we were really fortunate to win that ballgame. We all knew that coming off the field.

And then you look at the Wisconsin ballgame, a team that's been in two straight Rose Bowls now and that game went right down to the wire, too.

That's the reality of college football. There are a lot of good football players out there in a lot of different schools. In this case it's really no surprise because UNI has had a history of going, traveling anywhere, and playing extremely well against anybody.

So you have a case for this year and certainly you have a case from two years ago. A lot of our guys maybe don't understand that because they were not here in 2009, but they need to understand it going into this week, or, you know.

Q. When you start shift your attention to UNI, how quick were you to remind your team of that game and how often do you remind them of it throughout the week?

COACH FERENTZ: We really haven't talked about that yet. We will this afternoon. That

will be our first time together where we really focus on the opponent. But you know, if we ignore that, then we're fools. So we'd better be paying attention to that.

But there are a lot of guys on our team that 2009 is like ancient history to some guys. When they throw the Wisconsin film on, should get their attention if they are paying attention.

Q. When you have an FCS team on your schedule, would you rather have Northern Iowa or would you rather have somebody that's not this close?

COACH FERENTZ: Well, we did have a choice in this, so I'm fine with it. But I also know when we scheduled this game, I was pretty -- there was no way to predict everything, but pretty confident that it was going to be a really tough football game. And that's what we expect, only because that's what UNI has been for a long time. But again, certainly the last 12 years, you look at what they have done, it's awfully impressive.

Now maybe if I could have gotten out of it after the 2009 game -- but we didn't have a choice at that point. I think it was already in the books.

Q. Can you talk about the day you got Tanner Miller, what the circumstances were?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if I remember all of the exact details, other than we have done that with several guys where recruiting is an unpredictable time, and if something happens, you have a list of priority guys that you go to. It's ironic how it turned out.

So anyway, Tanner, we made that phone call and he was receptive. He certainly was quote, unquote, under-recruited. And I think that's one thing you could probably say about Bryce Paup, some of the guys that have played at UNI through the history of their program. They have had some excellent football players: Kurt Warner -- I'm still trying to figure out who the guy was that was ahead of him. They say he didn't even play until his fifth year. But they have had some great football players.

So, yeah, it was just one of those things where it was the next call for us.

Q. If UNI does go FBS, do you think guys like Tanner Miller, Brandon Miller - do you think those guys may not become available anymore?

COACH FERENTZ: Steve just brought me up-to-date, because I have not read papers really

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the last couple days. I'll catch up probably tomorrow night.

Yeah, it's a possibility. It's definitely a possibility. It will make things more competitive.

Q. And walk-ons, too --

COACH FERENTZ: I think we have already hit that spot, though. A lot of people to recruit in our state now besides the three scholarship schools in state. I think it's gotten tougher and tougher with every year.

Q. Is Sleeper back or is he still under suspension?

COACH FERENTZ: He's back in now this week, yeah.

Q. How would you assess your running game now?

COACH FERENTZ: It's been okay. We did certain -- certainly bailed us out two weeks ago and I thought it was solid the other day but there are things we can improve on. Damon is still a young player and we are still a little bit inconsistent up front with some things, things that we can do better and execute better and that's one thing on our list this week is trying to be a little bit more proficient this week as we move forward.

Q. The two runs on first and goal from the three, was that to give the offensive line something they could hang on the wall --

COACH FERENTZ: We thought those were the best calls in that situation. I mentioned the two opportunities that we had in the fourth quarter, and certainly that's another one there that when you get the ball -- the bad news was we didn't get the score that got pulled back. I haven't seen the replay, but I'm sure it was the right call. Couldn't tell on the tape, but I don't doubt that in the least.

But there's an opportunity where you have the ball inside the five and we can't knock it in there; and to their credit, they made the stops, we didn't. But that's one more example of if you're not making -- converting those situations that tight ball game like that, they all start to add up and those are three right there that came back and bit us.

Q. Games like this one or last week, the couple of weeks, have an emotional overtone one way or the other; how much do you either

play up or play down emotion in preparation of the game leading up to it, and then on game day and focus on the next week?

COACH FERENTZ: From our standpoint right now, I think there are two things at play. We really have to be focused on improving because we have a lot of things that we have to get better at this week in, all regards, offense, defense and special teams.

And then the other part is I think just the realization -- and Coach Saban probably addressed this last week a little bit, but if you're not careful, it's easy for people to think, boy, this and that and all that stuff. There are a lot of misconceptions out there. When you're playing competitive sports, it's typically pretty competitive, and at least from where we are at right now. Consider our situation; also consider what we have seen UNI do in two games.

You know, this thing, we are going to be at our absolute best, either emotionally or preparation-wise, intensity-wise, however you want to describe it, we are going to have to be ready to play to expect to win this football game. You can't predict 100% what the opponent is going to do, but history would tell you in this case, it's going to be a tough game for us, so we have got to be ready to go.

Q. Hitchens has some pretty impressive tackle totals so far, what have you seen from him?

COACH FERENTZ: He's coming around and coming along. I think we have two linebackers that are pretty confident with Kirksey and Morris, and then Hitch is kind of the newest of the group, if you will. He's a little bit more like a lot of our players that has not played a lot but certainly has the potential to be a good player. He was very productive the other day.

Some plays he would like to have back, too, I think; but he's making progress and I thought in the second half, he played a little bit more decisively. There's one play in particular they ran twice the first time. Didn't look real good on it and the second time he came back and played it really well.

When you see that, that's really encouraging. Whereas like James Morris is seeing things a lot better and a lot faster and he's playing at a really high level right now. The challenge is for Chris to get up there -- or for Hitch to get up there with the proficiency that James has or Chris

has. Those guys have played a little bit more, but he's making progress.

Q. Fumbles can hurt a running back's playing time. Can drops hurt a receiver's playing time?

COACH FERENTZ: I think at some point -- it's that fine line, too. It's like we talked about with the quarterback play. You don't want guys just paralyzed out there; hey, if I drop a ball, I'm out, or a pitcher that gives a home run, he's out of there, one of those shots. It's a fine line and we just have to work through it.

But we can hopefully concentrate a little bit more and do a little bit better. But again I think we've caught the ball -- I was pretty transparent on my feelings about it and how we were doing in the spring and I think we have really made improvement in August.

Now the next step is for the improvement to show up on the game field.

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