

October 29, 2013



An interview with:

COACH KIRK FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome, everybody. Congratulations to James Morris on the all-Big Ten defensive player of the week honors, second time. I think we've had two other guys who've done that twice (Jonathan Babineaux and Adrian Clayborn). Happy for him.

Captains are the same four guys. James Morris, Chris Kirksey, Brett Van Sloten and Mark Weisman. Then injury-wise, Dom Alvis is still out, so he will not play Saturday. We'll get back to work today. We got a big challenge on our hands getting ready for Wisconsin, so we'll start that this afternoon.

I'll throw it out for questions.

Q. Step back and talk about the evolution of James Morris' career.

COACH FERENTZ: The Penn State game, national TV game. Week before we went to Arizona, I believe, he was third team going down there. Got moved up that week due to an injury. Found himself on a nationally televised game. I think I'm correct that we gave up three points that game. When Tarp went out, he went in and did a great job. Heck of a way to start his career.

I got questioned somewhere in the last six months just regarding the down part of it. I must have slept through that part of his career. He's fought some injuries behind the scenes. If there's a down, that's a down. It's limited him a little bit. But that's like most players.

Guy works extremely hard on the practice field. He's unbelievable in terms of his preparation away from the field, away from the building. He's a great leader, just a great role model to be on the football team. Scary smart student on top of it.

Yet he's a normal guy. I think that's why he's able to be a leader.

We've had a lot of outstanding players come through here. As I mentioned, the two guys that had multiple Big Ten players of the week. I think Clayborn is special teams for one of the two. So, I mean, those guys are pretty good players. I'm not saying he's going to go to that level, but that's a pretty good club to be involved in there. Jonathan Babineaux is still playing.

Q. Specifically with this team, what are you seeing in him that might be different than before?

COACH FERENTZ: He's a more experienced player. That's the biggest thing. There's nothing like experience, for guys that use it.

One thing about James Morris, anything he has, he'll use. Experience is a part of that. Some guys just kind of float through life, so experience isn't that big a deal. That's not the case with him. He's one of those guys that goes back and reflects on everything and studies and improves from it. He's just a heck of a football player.

This is the year of the linebacker in the Big Ten, no question about that. We're getting ready to play against an outstanding player, too, in the way he's built, his mental makeup. A lot of good linebackers in our conference this year.

Q. Wisconsin seems to be about the same.

COACH FERENTZ: It's a little bit unusual in that we haven't played them in a couple years, so there's been a gap. We've been able to watch each other on film I think. Certainly the coaching change.

Offensively they look very similar, not identical but very similar to what they've been doing, and for a good reason. Defensively they did

make a wholesale change there. It's a very different team, they're a 3-4 team which is unusual in college football.

But they play very well. I mean, the bottom line is, both sides of the ball and their special teams are well-coached. They play hard. They're very disciplined as a football team. I think that's been characteristic of their teams for quite some time.

If you go back and look at Utah State film, you see the same thing. Those guys, it's interesting, they played at Wisconsin last September, it was a heck of a football game. Two very good football teams playing, two well-coached teams playing against each other. It's kind of ironic now Coach Andersen is there coaching on the other sideline. They're very well-coached.

Q. Can you see Barry's fingerprints on it still, some of the principles still exist?

COACH FERENTZ: I think that's fair. Again, Barry was never a 3-4 guy, as I recall. But the bottom line is when I left here in '89, that was a program that for whatever reasons had fallen on hard times. When I got back here nine years later, it was the total opposite. They were at the top floor instead of the bottom floor.

There's certain things that you do that are fundamentally part of who you are and what you are. Certainly Barry did a great job of establishing that as a football coach. I think the two successors have been both smart enough to say that this has been a pretty good formula for quite a while. You're not going to get too far off that path.

Q. Is it comforting in any sense that you have three senior linebackers to go against this running game now?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, it's nice having three seniors that are good players, for sure, against any attack. And last week they had to be very active and involved. Now Chris will actually play nearer the ball, closer to the football this week, for not the whole game but a lot of the game, which he's more of a DB a lot of times. So it's a very different style for us.

It's going to be a big transition for us on both sides of the football. These guys are very different than the offensive teams we've played the last couple weeks. They're very different defensively, too, obviously with the 3-4 scheme.

Having three good linebackers is great. They've got some pretty good linebackers, too, which I'm sure they feel good about.

Q. There's stories this week about Gordon after the decommit. You've had players who decommitted from elsewhere. It happens everywhere. Is it something you just accept as part of the coaching game and let roll off your back or are there times when it really does hurt?

COACH FERENTZ: Exactly. That's why there's national letter of intents and signing days. To me the issue is early signing. I think that's probably the best solution because when somebody signs a letter of intent, there's no contract.

It's just the way recruiting is. I don't think it's ever a surprise when a good home-state player stays in his home state when they have a great program. I think that's exactly what happened.

He was a guy we liked an awful lot in the recruiting process. We still like him a lot. I am sure he's still a great young man. He's obviously a very good football player.

It's kind of part of the recruiting deal. It's like bad breaks or injuries, if you can't deal with those kinds of things, you probably ought to do something else. You go to the NFL, they do have contracts in the NFL that are binding. But letters of intent are binding, too, for the most part.

Q. What do you remember from the game against Wisconsin in 2010?

COACH FERENTZ: We lost by a point, that's what I remember. It was really disappointing. I like the one the year before. Let's talk about that one).

We've had a lot of games back and forth with them. The series has been a really good series, other than '99.

Q. When you look back at 2010, and look today where they're going, you have kind of struggled. Do you think it was a kick in the gut, that game?

COACH FERENTZ: We had three in a row that were really tough. It was a tough stretch. You can pick any play, any instance out of there. It was a tough stretch. You could have brought up the 2010 Northwestern game a week ago. That was a kick in the gut, too.

Anytime you lose, it's a kick in the gut. It's ancient history; really doesn't have much to do with this game this year. A lot of these guys playing

this game were in high school in 2010.

Q. You don't think it can linger on into another season?

COACH FERENTZ: I hope not. But that was 2011, a couple years ago. That's ancient history to me right now.

Q. You also recruited James White. Do you think he and Gordon have progressed the way you expected?

COACH FERENTZ: We don't recruit anyone that we don't think is going to become a good player. James White is kind of the forgotten guy in some ways. He played with a really good running back last couple years. I don't know if there's been a better back in our conference in quite awhile than Ball. Gordon has great numbers, and rightfully so. But James White has been an outstanding player.

I don't know if you want to call it in a quiet way, but they've had a good 1-2 punch for quite a while now. They always have good backs. Boy, those guys are a good pair.

Q. There have been some quick postgame handshakes in the conference this fall. Is this a notion that's old-fashioned?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if it's old-fashioned. I don't know when the tradition began. It just seems like everybody tries to read a lot into it. I don't know if you're supposed to hug people, shake hands. I really don't know what protocol is.

I can just tell you this. Me personally, I think it's uncomfortable before a game to talk to an opponent. We're both thinking about the same thing, I would assume. Our team wants to beat their team, their team wants to beat ours.

After the game, what do you say? If you win, what do you say? If you lose, what do you say? I've hardly Pop Warner, but I've been doing this for 15 years here now, three years at Maine, and I have not found a good thing to talk about before or after games.

If I were the commissioner of sports, I'd say, we have a great conference, great coaches. I have an awful lot of respect for everybody in the league. That's true of everybody that's been in the league since I've been here. It's a great league to coach in.

I don't want to get in the comparison game, but I can't imagine there's been better camaraderie conference-wise than the Big Ten.

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So, I mean, everybody wants to read into who likes who, Sally is dating Joey, all that stuff. I mean, it's just silly stuff to me.

Q. You know the cameras are rolling on that moment.

COACH FERENTZ: Believe me, I'm not thinking about that. I just want to get in the locker room. That's all I want to do. Win, lose or draw, I want to get in the locker room, period. Maybe that's wrong, but that's how I feel.

Q. As the season goes, people are going to stack the box on you. Have you talked about having to mix things up a little bit on first down?

COACH FERENTZ: I know you haven't covered us in a while. Even when we can't run the ball, they stack the box. There's a perception, imagine that, even in the coaching. If you can throw it, you got to be able to throw it to get them not to stack it.

Q. Is that what needs to happen in the second half of games, the passing game needs to open up?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I don't think so. I mean, I haven't looked at statistics that way. But, you know, I figured that was on the agenda somewhere.

I'll give you a parallel in my mind. How do you explain us having 11 penalties in our second ballgame, I think it was. Pretty sure it was. We had three the other day.

I promise you, we have not done any drills on penalties. We don't do up-downs, laps, when guys get them. Some people do, and some people find that effective. I don't know. But to me it's concentration, it's a mental thing.

We had no false starts up at Columbus, and that's a tough place for an offensive team to play. I think it's just a matter of you've got to concentrate your way through things. I know it's a fact we've been leading every game at halftime. It's obviously a fact that we haven't won every game.

Somehow, some way you just have to concentrate better. I think the solution is in concentration, execution, than it is doing up-downs or laps, that type of thing.

Q. This is the fourth time you've played

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a team coming off a bye week if you add Iowa State in there. You've been through it a few times now. Do you sense teams are better prepared?

COACH FERENTZ: Not necessarily. You know, I did detect that during the summer. I don't look at our schedule too hard, the grid. But going through in the summertime, I take an hour, somewhere in there, just kind of look at it.

I don't know how many times we've started on the road in the Big Ten since we've been here, but I know it's more than half, well more than half. They always say it's the computer. I don't know how the bye weeks get determined.

It's what you do with the bye week. You know, so if they got a head start on us, then they did. It's our job, we have to overcome it. We have ample time to be prepared. That won't be a factor in the game, I don't think.

Q. Your defensive ends played well Saturday. Did you see that coming? Drew is a new player.

COACH FERENTZ: Drew is young in that he's only a second-year chronological on campus. He's a true sophomore. Didn't play all that much last year.

It was about this time last year, roughly somewhere midpoint, we decided it would be best to play him because we thought he'd be a candidate to play this year. So we made that decision. At least he got his feet wet and he was working with the first and second group. So for us to be successful, we need to have guys step up.

Mike has been our rotation guy, has done a really nice job. I thought he played his best game on Saturday. Then Nate got thrown in there for a little bit more exposure and did a good job, too. One thing, he'll go hard. He may not always go the right way, but he'll go hard.

To be a good football team, we need to have somebody ready to go. That's really true at every position. Hopefully we won't get tested in too many spots. We have a total conference. Those guys have to play hard and play well.

Q. The overtime touchdown to C.J., how does that carry over to Jake?

COACH FERENTZ: I think everything a player does, it's on the positive side. It sure helps with everybody because just like guys that aren't prepared or didn't know what to do in a situation, that causes some doubt. You know, you always try to give people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe

they're inexperienced, they weren't quite prepared for that. You hope they grow from those things.

We all know quarterback is a different position, and everything you do is scrutinized more than other positions. Football's a team thing, but basically on that one, that was him making a great effort.

He knew where the problems were going to come from, he acknowledged that, had faith in C.J. to get where he needed to get. It was really two guys that hooked up. I'm not saying the other guys didn't do their jobs. Two guys going maybe above and beyond to make that happen. We've had a lot of those that don't work out. So it was certainly good to see it, see us connect on that. That was a really good thing.

The thing that's impressed me about him, again, he responds from 'bad things,' and then also he does really have good awareness out there. He hasn't played much, but to have awareness, he knew what was going on on that play all the way.

Q. The season Abbrederis is having is impressive. What are your thoughts on him?

COACH FERENTZ: I've been watching him for a couple years now. If you watch their film offensively, you cannot help but see him play. As I understand, I think he was a walk-on when he went there. I think he's one of the best players in the conference. He's just a fantastic football player. He's been that way for a couple years. You name it, receiving, blocking, this guy is a football player.

Q. What separates him in your mind from other receivers?

COACH FERENTZ: He just runs around, makes plays. He is non-stop. Without studying him, again, watching him, watching other people on film, they match up against Wisconsin, you can't help but notice No. 4. Doesn't matter who the opponent is, he has really played well.

Q. Tevaun Smith made catches in the first play of the overtime, 14-yard gain. Is that a sign of his maturity and you trusting him to be in right spot?

COACH FERENTZ: If our four can become like their four, that would be a good thing. I'd really like to see that happen. Tevaun is improving. That's possible.

He was actually like the second option on that play. They covered the guy we were trying to

go to, and Jake did a good job of finding him. That was a nice job on Jake's part. Then Tevaun made a play after the run. That's a big part of the passing game, if you can get yards after you catch the ball, which we have not done a great job of. But that was good to see. He's climbing. He's coming on.

Q. The reaction when you heard Bret left Wisconsin for Arkansas?

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't thought a lot about it. I was surprised. Went home that night and told my wife, If I'm ever surprised at what happens in college football, just hit me with a baseball bat.

That surprised me a little bit. I just didn't see it coming. I wasn't thinking too globally at that point either.

But it's one of those choices. Coaches a lot of times, successful coaches, have a lot of choices to make all the time. He was more than successful at Wisconsin, extremely successful. Other people want to try to lure good people to their places. That's not uncommon in what we do. It's a choice that Bret made. You know, it worked out.

It will work out for him, I'm sure. It's worked out well for Wisconsin. They're doing really well.

Q. Is your ability to do some different things defensively, giving offenses different looks, is that a personnel thing? Do you recruit to be able to do that?

COACH FERENTZ: No, I think it's kind of the way it is right now. Last week that package was good for who we were playing. But it was only good in certain situations. You know, we've used that in the past going back a ways.

But we are, I don't want to say linebacker heavy, but we have guys that we feel pretty comfortable with right now at that position. A little short on the D-line. It makes sense. It's something we'll try to utilize the rest of the way if appropriate.

Q. Do you feel like you're more prepared against running quarterbacks?

COACH FERENTZ: No matter whether it's four down or three down, it helps to have guys that can run on the field. We're a little faster certainly with that group.

But, again, a big part of it is that we're a linebacker senior team right now. We've got three

guys. We usually don't have three seniors starting. We really feel like Quinton could play well if he got the opportunity. Gives him a chance to get out there. Then we threw Spearman in there, we're trying to bring him along.

But, yeah, it helps. Seems like we play a lot of teams that have fleet-footed quarterbacks. That's just kind of college football right now.

Q. You've thrown a lot of wide receivers on the field after Kevonte. You have five redshirts right now. Are you seeing some separation?

COACH FERENTZ: They're moving down the road, but none of them are there yet. Kevonte is our most experienced and polished guy. He clearly is at the top right now. Then Tevaun, since he's starting right now, we rank him as our number two guy for obvious reasons. But he's a young guy. I talked about Drew Ott being a true sophomore, and Tevaun is the same way.

He's on the right path. All the other guys have their individual stories. They're improving weekly. That's healthy. Pleased with the guys we're redshirting right now. We're seeing some good things from them in practice, too.

It's a little different when you have to integrate them into a system. They're doing a good job. We went through a period there where we got caught shorthanded. I think we're on the right path.

Q. How much is your running back play tied to Carl and Louis?

COACH FERENTZ: It helps immensely. It's well-documented, last year we were young up front. We had two seniors that really hadn't played much. We had some injury issues. We paid a price. It was hard.

If last year was James Morris' bad year, maybe that was part of it. Like I said, I watch a guy on film every week. He looks pretty good to me. This guy's a good football player.

Q. What does it say about Louis?

COACH FERENTZ: That's Trinca-Pasat. I'm not saying he's Matt Kroul, but he's kind of like Matt Kroul. You can't make those guys quit. It's hard to get them off the field practice wise, game field. Matt was a little flashier, but Louis is a guy that works hard. Boy, he's perfect for us.

Q. Did you realize he had that much speed?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I don't know where that came from, but it was a good time to have it, that's for sure. It was welcomed.

Q. Did your defense execute well in overtime in those four plays? Your secondary must have been doing a good job.

COACH FERENTZ: There's always some warts. If they don't catch you, in other words, it's hard to be perfect on every play. We weren't perfect, especially on one of them. But he wasn't in a position where he could take advantage of it. So that's the great thing about football.

But, yeah, I mean, at that point I think our crowd was certainly into it in a way that I haven't heard in quite a while. Our players were into it. The bench was into it. It was a good way to finish the game, for sure. Probably got kicked off with the offense doing their job with the ball.

So it was good. That's the fun of it all, when it all comes together, everybody's working hard. But it was a team effort, for sure.

Q. What C.J. is doing around the goal line, catching touchdowns, is that what kind of makes him an NFL commodity?

COACH FERENTZ: Big guys with that ability. Yeah, the catch the other day wasn't necessarily like a guy hanging on him catch. It was him getting to where he had to get to make the play. Obviously he's got good extension. He's a tough guy to cover. It's like playing basketball against a guy that's taller than you, has good ball skills, which C.J. does. That certainly will help him, yeah.

Q. Wisconsin's running backs don't turn the ball over. Is that unusual for those types of players?

COACH FERENTZ: I think it's a reflection of the coaching that they get. Again, going back in history, since I've been back, which is a significant period of time now, Wisconsin has just been an extremely well-coached football team. You know, so it's like the penalty thing. A lot of that's coaching and concentration. I think that's a big part of ball security.

My guess is they don't let you line up back there if you're a guy that's sloppy with the football. I think they probably instill that in their players. They've had a lot of good runningbacks through the years, they've got two good ones right now and

another one coming along. I think they understand how important it is to protect the football.

Q. How difficult is it to defend the jet sweep?

COACH FERENTZ: It's obviously hard. It's been a big thing for us. They had it on the road for us in '09 right off the bat with that same package. They ended up not getting a lot of points, but it felt like we were losing 25-0 at halftime. We couldn't slow that thing down.

Q. You mentioned the carryover for Jake. What about the whole team and the crowd getting into it?

COACH FERENTZ: It's only positive. If it's not going to help us Saturday, we still have to go out and find a way to play better than our opponent. That's the fun in football, when you get it going a little bit, get the crowd into it.

Our crowd has been fantastic. Our chant support has been unbelievable for a long, long time. I'm going back to '81. But it always helps when you make some plays to help get them into it. It was a good sequence, for sure. It was fun to have that electricity going.

Q. The teams that have beaten you aren't losing to anyone. Is that something you point out to your players?

COACH FERENTZ: At one point I told to our team, I make it occasionally, we're moving into November now. All the pre-season hype and all the publications, all just the on and on analysis, expertise, blah, blah, blah, really doesn't matter. What it comes down to is what happens on the field.

This is a time of year where things become a little bit more clear. The three teams that beat us, we all felt going into the games that those were really good teams. At least that's what we were seeing. I'm not totally surprised.

But there's a lot of football to be played yet. But all three of those football teams are good. We're playing another one this week that they've got two losses, you could argue they're a one-loss team. They're a really good football team. We've going to have our work cut out for us.

Q. Is Mark Weisman good to go?

COACH FERENTZ: We got a couple guys nicked up. We're practicing today. We should be

fine.

Q. The other team's quarterback, what do you see?

COACH FERENTZ: A guy who has done a very nice job. Yeah, they're built differently than some of the teams we played. Two weeks ago we played a team that had a quarterback, a running back, and everything revolved around them. Not that other guys weren't really good players. They were. They've got an excellent surrounding cast. Obviously last week the quarterback was a big focal point.

This team's a little different in that they've got outstanding running backs, and the running backs come from all different angles. Again, as I said, they've got one of the best receivers I think in the country on their team. Their quarterback has done a wonderful job of making them go. Sometimes people take that for granted. But he's a really good football player and he's a winner, just like the last couple guys we've played against.

Q. You talked about experience, and not a lot of your guys have experience playing Wisconsin.

COACH FERENTZ: We're going to counter that. Not a lot of their guys have experience against us either. Nor did they come to Kinnick. The only strange part about all that is we are border states. But we've covered that territory before, too, just with the expansion. The good news is moving forward we'll be playing each year, which is what it should be, because we have a trophy involved.

It won't come easy. Thank you.

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