

November 22, 2011



An interview with:

COACH FERENTZ

COACH FERENTZ: Welcome. First of all, our captains are the same four guys. Tyler Nielsen, Mike Daniels defensively, and Marvin McNutt and James Vandenberg on offense. Doesn't look like Jordan Canzeri will be traveling. He hasn't really responded. Wasn't able to work yesterday. So he will not be traveling.

Mika'il McCall will not be making the trip either. He violated a team policy and will not be with the team this week. Those two players will not be with us.

As far as this game goes, on-site, we're thrilled. Very happy to be associated with the concept of the Heroes Trophy. I'm not sure whose idea it was, but I congratulate anybody who was involved. I think it's just a great initiative. It's outstanding that people from both states are going to be recognized for doing some really good things, just really good, normal people out there just being recognized. My guess is it's going to be really tough to figure out who to recognize, who to honor.

Besides that difficulty, again, I want to congratulate anybody involved with that. I think it's just a great concept.

It was a good win for us Saturday, as I said after the game. Congratulate Marvin on setting another record. He's really done a great job. It's a real credit to him, the way he's played all season long, the way he's worked for several years now.

We face a very tough team in Nebraska certainly. It's going to be a great challenge for us going over there. It's a tough place to play. Our players have not been there yet, so it's going to be a new experience for them that way.

They're a very talented football team. If you look at them offensively, defensively, they got a lot of speed, special teams the same way. Got good size, good athleticism. They've been a premiere program for a long, long time. They look the part and they play the part. They're really a good football team.

Very dangerous, a lot of danger on the offensive side of the football. Defensively, they're big and strong up front, very athletic at the linebacker, secondary positions. Those guys can really cover ground and do a good job when they get there.

Special teams-wise, two things that really stand out, their return games are excellent, both kickoff and punt return. Then their field goal kicker is having a tremendous season as well. They've got a lot of weapons. They're very well-coached. It's going to be a real challenge for us. We'll try to finish up this week, go over and play a good game on Friday.

Q. How important has the play of Keenan Davis been?

COACH FERENTZ: He's fought through things. I'm really happy. I think he's improved and grown with each week. That's good to see. I would say he is important. I would say everybody that we're going to try to get the football to, whether it be he, C.J. Fiedorowicz, Marcus Coker most prominently, all those guys have a role.

I think one thing about football, you can pretty much take anybody out of a game if you choose to from a defensive standpoint. If we're not able to go to other areas, it's going to allow them to do that with Marvin, certainly that won't be the case.

Q. Can you talk about the quicker turnaround with you playing on a Friday, being after Thanksgiving.

COACH FERENTZ: If it was in the first

half of the season, I know some people do that, play on Fridays, even Thursdays. First half of the season, I think it would be a real challenge. I think at this point it really works out pretty well. We're not in school right now, which is nice. I think that makes it a little bit easier.

You might think we have a lot of time with our players. Staff has been working on getting ready for the game. We got a lot of work that goes into it. We didn't really meet with our players till last evening. This week we pushed things back a little bit later.

It does allow us for things to move quickly. Quite frankly, I think in November, might not be bad to have a six-day cycle for all of our games. I'm not going to volunteer that. It's really not a big deal.

Q. You touched on after Saturday's game you had conversations during the off-season with other coaches about preparing for a stretch like this, having a short week. What were some of the conversations like? What were you told?

COACH FERENTZ: Basically I think there are three people in mind that were kind enough to share their practice. Two of them shared practice schedules with us, exactly what they did. The other one gave us a pretty good description. Everybody's approach is a little bit different. We picked and chose what would fit us the best.

I think it was a good effort. So far we're comfortable. We've only been out there one day. Today is really like a Wednesday for us. We still got a lot of work to do.

But we won't have any excuses on Friday. If we don't play well, it won't be because of this week. I think we're in good shape there and I think our players are in good mental spirit. The other good thing is, it's about as healthy as we've been really since going into that Michigan game when we started to turn the corner a little bit.

Q. I wasn't around in 1981, but can you take me back to the first game on the sidelines.

COACH FERENTZ: I had dark hair back then. I remember that game. That was my first game. I was basically like Willie off the pickle boat. I had no idea where I was, what was going on for the most part. Back then I just kind of knew how to get to work. I lived about three baseball throws from here over there in University Heights. I got that down pretty quickly after about a month.

You know, the thing I remember most of all is just the crowd I couldn't believe coming out of the tunnel, which was at the opposite end. It was really a special moment. It just kept getting better during the course of the day. It was a really historic win for our team and our program, probably the culmination of a couple year of efforts by our players, Coach Fry and the staff that were here prior to my arrival. Great moment, great way to start out. It was probably the most memorable moment of a four-game series. We didn't have too many memorable moments in the '99/2000 series. At least you picked the best game out of six that I know of.

Q. Significance of that game when you were a young coach?

COACH FERENTZ: I knew it felt pretty good. I knew we'd lost 50 something to nothing, 50 something to a little. Maybe we scored a touchdown, I don't know. So it was really significant, I know that. I think they were ranked sixth. We were probably ranked 156 or something like that.

A good moment. A lot of really good moments. It was a great moment. Really got this things going.

Q. Iowa scored on its first drive, using an unbalanced line?

COACH FERENTZ: Real simple. Coach Fry, it was a directive from the top. Formation called Big Red, I believe. I think it maybe threw them off a little bit. I know defensively we changed our front. They're an excellent execution offense. They were then, they are now still. I'm sure they prepared for something else. Kind of threw them off a little bit. We had a pretty salty group up front.

It was one of those things. It was a great moment. We could use a little of that magic probably moving forward now that we're going to play them again.

Q. You didn't want to play on Thanksgiving week to begin with. You went along with it because you had to. As far as last year, you felt like you had good practice through the week, kind of flat performance. Are you changing anything through this week?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, that's why I really supported the idea of playing Friday. For my money, we'll never know, there's no way to

document this, but I thought we lost our focus somewhere from the time we left practice Thursday. We practiced earlier in the day, until game time. We let our guys go home. So most of the guys from other parts of the country got absorbed with the local guys, Iowa, Illinois guys.

I'm not saying that was a factor, but I know in '02 we did the same thing going down to the Orange Bowl and it was a disaster. Kind of a page out of that book, if you will.

I don't know if it will help or not, but we'll find out. For us Thanksgiving is on Saturday. It is real simple. That's what we're doing. The players will be off once the game is over. They can do whatever they're going to do. We'll have a short day as a staff on Saturday. We'll enjoy Thanksgiving on Saturday. It's like a bowl game. Bowl games come early. That's great.

Q. What do you think makes for a good rivalry at this level?

COACH FERENTZ: Two competitive teams. We haven't done so well in this series. We were next to last I think, I don't know where we were ranked, I guess they don't rank the bottom third, but we were certainly at the bottom of the bottom third in '99, and they were in the top five, so that didn't help. Then we went over and turned it over a ton in 2000. We weren't very good then either and they were pretty good. That wasn't much fun.

Hopefully we've closed the gap a little bit. We'll see. Time will tell.

Q. Do you sense from these players, even though they haven't played this series yet, there is that rivalry between them? You have guys from Nebraska as well.

COACH FERENTZ: I don't know if I have a great feel to answer that question. The way I kind of look at it, I looked at it in the out of season. We traded one team from the east that wears red uniforms that is really good and picked up one from the west that is really good and wears red uniforms. There will be a lot of red in there. There was up in Wisconsin.

You know, it's one tough game to another. That's the nature of this conference, though. That's a great thing. I think we're all really pleased about Nebraska joining the league. It's made us a stronger league, but with that strength comes more challenge, and this is certainly going to be a challenge for us.

There's only one team sitting at home now knowing they're playing in Indianapolis. These guys beat them pretty thoroughly a couple weeks ago. So that's about all I have to say about Nebraska. It's going to be a challenge.

Q. What is your opinion on Martinez?

COACH FERENTZ: It seems like it's a broken record. It's interesting, in our conference, not that he's just like, but we have some quarterbacks that are really electrifying and dangerous. He certainly fits in that category. He can basically hurt you on any play of the game. He's really a dangerous player, excellent.

Q. What stands out to you about what makes Bo Pelini such a successful coach?

COACH FERENTZ: I have a tremendous amount of respect for him. I did when he was an assistant. Our paths crossed very briefly. He was here for an official visit I believe right back in the '80s. Not that he was coming here, but he did come here, probably out of respect for the Stoops family. Ended up working here after I left. I don't know if it was his first job or not, but he was a GA. Everybody here just had a tremendous impression of him, as we did in recruiting, too. So it starts there.

Then if you look at his career since that time, he's done a great job everywhere he's been, been doing a great job in a short amount of time at Nebraska. He's an excellent football coach. I think he's a tremendous person.

Just like them coming into the league. He's made our league better. Him coming in as a head coach has made us a better league as well.

Q. Can you elaborate on McCall?

COACH FERENTZ: He won't be with us. Violated team policy.

Q. Was it something after Purdue, after the game?

COACH FERENTZ: I think the fact he's not going this week, it's probably safe to assume that, yeah, something I learned afterwards, so...

Q. Just a one-week deal with him?

COACH FERENTZ: Haven't made that decision yet. We'll just take it a week at a time right now. I'm just trying to get through Friday. That's where I'm at.

Q. Who is the backup now?

COACH FERENTZ: Jason White, De'Andre Johnson would be the third guy, yes.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the progression that James Vandenberg has made? He's got a chance to do some pretty good things.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, I think he already has done a lot of good things. He's like a lot of our players on the team I think that have improved. The difference is he's in a little bit more of a prominent position. I think we have guys that are playing better football now than they were earlier. Mike Daniels, not that he's a new guy, you look at what he did Saturday compared to earlier in the season. He was nicked up. Last week was the first week he really had a good week of practice, full week, where he was healthy, had a smile on his face. I think it showed up on Saturday.

Kind of gone off the track there.

I think James is learning every week. He's doing a lot of good things. Like every week, there are a handful of plays he'd love to have back from Saturday. You don't get those back. But he learns from them. It's really fun to watch him grow and develop.

This will be a challenge. With crowd noise, we're going to a tough environment with a defense that can close things down pretty quick.

Q. He made two throws Saturday that were outstanding, one with a helmet in his face.

COACH FERENTZ: He took one in the chops.

Q. I think he's tougher than people give him credit for.

COACH FERENTZ: He gives you that Opie look, whatever Opie's last name was.

Q. Taylor.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, looks a bit like Opie and acts like him. I think it's all an act.

But he's a nitty-gritty, tough guy. There's no question in my mind. I think all his teammates have always seen him that way.

But the throw to C.J. was excellent, a great play by both guys. Then the one you're referring to, I think it's a great illustration. To me if a quarterback can't do that, you're going to have a hard time winning. It's not much fun. I think I read

one of his quotes. He didn't see much of the action once the ball came out.

But that's part of being a quarterback. It's not always going to be pretty. It's not always going to be nice. It takes a lot of courage to stand in there and throw the ball and know you're going to get nailed, and he got nailed pretty good there.

Q. Was Nebraska the prime competition in recruiting James?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, James could probably answer that better. They beat us to the draw on offering him. I don't know how engaged he was with them. I don't know that. But he kept us in limbo for a while. That I can speak to.

He just put his hand up once we offered or once we went down there and visited him. It wasn't like, Oh, yeah, I'm coming. We don't get many of those. Must be something I say or do, but that's the way it goes. They probably pulled the scholarship, that's probably what happened, he came here (laughter).

Q. I know on the road you stressed execution, wanting to get the win. How much does it help this team's confidence that you have gotten rid of all this talk?

COACH FERENTZ: We don't talk that much about it. But I know it's out there obviously. You got to write about something and talk about something, so it helps. It definitely helps.

But I'll stand by what I've been saying all along. You have to play better than the other team. There's no question it's a bigger challenge when you're at somebody else's place, but it doesn't guarantee anything. If you're the home team, that doesn't guarantee anything. We experience that two weeks ago.

But, yeah, you have to be a little bit more focused, you got to be a little bit more mentally hard-minded I think to win on the road. Teams that can accomplish that have good seasons. You're not going to have a good season if you can't master that. Not that you're going to win them all on the road.

If you go back at least with our best teams, we've done a representative job on the road. I think everybody's realizing if you look around the country, not just our conference, if you play BCS-level football, it's a challenge to go on the road.

Q. What is your take in the uniqueness of the series, two national geographical rivals that haven't played much over the last hundred years, now it looks like you'll play every year the next hundred.

COACH FERENTZ: A hundred years is a long while. Have you been paying attention to college football the last ten years? Weren't we going into four divisions two months ago, wasn't that the talk out there? What happened to all that? Has that died? I know there were going for four super conferences.

They put the pods on pause because the season got in the way. October and November, when it gets interesting, kind of got in the way of all the hypotheticals.

So anyway the question. I think it makes perfect sense. It was great for the conference. Obviously I think it affects us probably more than anybody. So it's a good thing.

Q. Would you like to have the rivalry game late or early?

COACH FERENTZ: I haven't thought much about that. We have one at each end. It's a nice balance. Seems like we need one in the middle. Seems like all our games are rivalry games. Purdue. They all kind of seem to feel that way.

Q. What does it say about Marcus? There's no net for him, no number two guy, there probably won't be the rest of the year. You put a lot on his plate.

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah.

Q. He seems to have responded.

COACH FERENTZ: I'll say the same thing I said about James a minute ago. Marcus doesn't give you the Opie stuff. Marcus is kind of like the Buckingham Palace soldier, he gives you no reaction at all.

I think just evidenced by what he's done this year already on the field, he's just a very tough, tough-minded and physically tough guy.

Q. Do you get that, too, from him?

COACH FERENTZ: Yeah, absolutely.

Q. Do you wonder what's going on?

COACH FERENTZ: All the time (laughter). I've always preferred to judge actions more than words and expressions. You get fooled sometimes.

Q. Does he play football in a bad mood?

COACH FERENTZ: I don't think it's a bad mood, that's just his nature. He's not in a bad mood, at least not all the time.

Probably to follow up, when he is in one, you don't know it. When he's in a good one, you don't know it either.

Q. He doesn't want to deal with media.

COACH FERENTZ: No, he's never said that to me or anyone that I'm aware of.

Q. At left guard, you have moved a couple guys around, Matt Robin and Brandon Scherff. They've had a lot of challenges to work with the last few weeks. How have they performed?

COACH FERENTZ: We got more this week. This front four is really athletic. They've got one of their best guys out, but it seems like they've got a few others in the barn there.

It's going to be a real challenge. Matt has the experience edge over Brandon right now. We're really high on Brandon. I think he's going to be a good player here. He's done a lot of good things. But he's moving up on that progression right now. He needs more time. He was hurt a lot in camp, too.

We talked about Marcus Coker being out a lot in camp and it showed. It's hard to catch up, especially if you're a younger player. If you miss a lot of time in camp, for a lineman, that's a critical building phase, if you will. I think he's still playing a little bit of catch-up, and he's going to be a good player.

Matt is a guy that's really earned the right to play. I tell people, he's not the prettiest car on the lot, but it's like that car you drove in college, he's going to get you there and you can count on it. But there's a lot of value in that, I think. He's a tough, hard-minded guy.

Right now he's got the edge just 'cause of that experience level a little bit. A little bit more age.

Q. What stands out to you about the Huskers on defense? Is the 45 points they gave up at Michigan more of an anomaly?

COACH FERENTZ: I think you have to look at the big picture if you're going to talk about

that game. I'll quote Gerry DiNardo, right after the Michigan State game, I don't know if he was at it but watched it. At that time he thought Nebraska was the best team in the conference.

I'll stop right there and tell you I have a lot of respect for Gerry DiNardo. If he says something about football, I listen because I think he has a great football mind. There was his comment about what he saw them do to Michigan State, the team we know is going to Indiana next week. He really felt like Nebraska is the best team in the conference. This is not just my opinion, it's a matter of record. He said that on the air. It was probably right after that game.

I think you have to look at special teams, turnovers, things that normally are going to happen in a game. They had a lot of things happen to them. If we sit around waiting for those things this Friday, it's going to be a long day. We better be prepared for the team that played pretty well at home a couple weeks ago.

Q. Does Lavonte David remind you of anybody?

COACH FERENTZ: I'm not good at the comparison game. He's extremely productive. He can really run. He's like a big DB playing linebacker. I think he was a DB at one point. I think they're reporting him at 225, 230, but he plays strong. He can really cover ground.

You talk about the defense again, they got a lot of guys that really move. You got to work really hard. They get there. They're well-coached, too.

Q. Were you surprised that Marvin is not a finalist for the Biletnikoff award?

COACH FERENTZ: Yes, probably on two fronts. Somebody mentioned that on the teleconference, one of the two calls that came in. The other one was to wish me a happy Thanksgiving. Wasn't much interest in Iowa today in the Big Ten Conference. I don't know why they have it the holiday week. Everybody is probably on their way to grandma's.

I was surprised. I didn't know there was an announcement. I don't know when that came out. Again, I don't know. I know the guy at Oklahoma State is having a great year. I keep hearing his name. I have no idea what the other players are doing, what have you.

I just know this: What Marvin has done here this season and during his career is awfully impressive. I'll go back to what I said last week. If

you look at some of the names he's gone beyond, Danan Hughes, Tim Dwight, Ronnie Harmon, to name three, and have a yard-per-catch more than any of those guys, that's awfully impressive. He has done a great job. All the credit goes to him. He's worked really hard.

Q. You had offense in 2002 and others that have attacked. Marvin, he seems like he's one of the play-makers you have who wants the ball in critical times, gets it, does what he needs to do?

COACH FERENTZ: He's made some great catches, first and foremost. I know that's well-documented. But then he's finished plays, too, no matter what position. That was Ronnie Harmon. Ronnie was mentally tough. Ronnie got the ball, they had a hard time getting him down. Different kind of performer, but same value there. When you have one of those guys, that's really good.

Marvin is helping break all the stereotypes of us not having receivers. Kind of throwing that one out the window. Again, it's a real credit to him. He's worked really hard. If you think about where he was three years ago, that's really impressive.

Q. Nebraska has a tradition of playing the day after Thanksgiving. How long did it take before you were approached considering moving the game from a Saturday to a Friday?

COACH FERENTZ: I think we kind of actually initiated it. Not that it matters, because we were aware of the fact they had been doing that. We thought they'd been in agreement. Seems like it's worked well for them. After our experience last year, I was kind of at the conclusion of, Why not? Couldn't be any worse than what we did last year on Saturday, quite frankly. I might eat those words here after this next two years.

The other thing, I think it gives us a chance to be in the national spotlight, which how can that be a bad thing unless we go out there and play bad.

What the heck, I think it's a great opportunity for our guys to play. They've had that, enjoyed that, I don't want to call it a luxury, but I remember that for many years, I used to watch them as a kid. Didn't they play Oklahoma on Friday? It's a good thing for us. We're excited to get invited to the party. It's a great deal.

Q. What about the prospect of playing Memorial Stadium?

COACH FERENTZ: Basically what we said a minute ago, a while ago. One nice thing about this conference, we play in so many great environments, you know, whether you're talking about Ohio State, Michigan, Penn State, Wisconsin, we play in a lot of tough places. This I think will be just adding one more to the list.

Again, how lucky can you be to experience this? If you like college football, this is a great thing. At the end of the day, the stadium and the fans won't decide the game, it's what we do on the field. It's not a field trip, but at least it's another exposure to something pretty neat about college football.

Q. Is part of stopping the Husker rushing attack maybe daring them to pass more than they're accustomed to?

COACH FERENTZ: If there's one thing we really had wished, if we could change one thing, I think we'd all agree, we'd like to have played the run better this year. We haven't done a great job of that. We're going to get really tested this week. This is a group, not only Martinez, it starts with him. That runningback is really good. They've got some younger guys behind him. They'll mix it around. They got a lot of guys that are really good.

It's going to be a challenge. They're good up front. Our guys are really going to have to be at their best. The best news I can give is we're pretty healthy, which I couldn't say a month ago. Outside of Dom Alvis being out. Everybody else available is healthy. Hopefully we'll have a good week of practice and we're going to have to be at our best to slow them down.

Q. With Nebraska joining the Big Ten, have you seen them more in your recruiting areas?

COACH FERENTZ: Sort of, but not major yet. We just talked about that the other day. Be curious to see if they do shift more in this direction. I'm sure they will. They've had such a history in Texas and California, to name two places, I'd imagine they got a lot of good connections. They'll probably keep that alive as well.

You never know what recruits are thinking. A lot of you guys know better than I do, but I think that's a thought that recruits have. Where you end up playing your game, it factors in a little bit. Thank you.



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