

NFL Draft 2011: One-on-One with Ryan Donahue

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As he prepares for perhaps the biggest weekend of his life, former Iowa punter Ryan Donahue took time to discuss with *HawkeyeDrive.com* what the future has in store for him, as well as reflect back on his Hawkeye career and his preparation for this week's NFL Draft.

Should Donahue be selected, he will be the first Iowa punter since Reggie Roby back in 1983 to be picked in the NFL Draft.

Below is a complete transcript of *HawkeyeDrive.com's* interview with Donahue:

HawkeyeDrive.com (HD): Talk about how the last four months have gone for you since beating Missouri in the Insight Bowl up until now.

Ryan Donahue: Yeah. I mean obviously, winning the Insight Bowl was a nice cap off of a career at Iowa. Other than starting 51 games, I've been blessed to win three straight bowl games after a tough drought. After that, I kind of took two weeks off, figured out the agent situation and all the financial stuff to train. I worked out with a couple of kicking coaches while I was home. From there was the East-West Shrine Game, so I went down there. I was there for a week, met a lot of different scouts, a lot of different people.

After that, I came back to Iowa after that week in January. I came back to Iowa to train for the Combine. I think that was about 3-4 weeks of training. Coach Doyle helped me out a lot with my torso workouts, just stuff that really pertains to me.

He did a really good job of individualizing my workout, to make me the best punter I can be at the Combine. So obviously then I went down to the Combine after those two weeks of training.

The toughest part was not having to record a hang time. There wasn't really ideal conditions at Iowa. There was snow on the ground, and you can't really kick outside. That was the toughest part. The first time I was going to record a hang-time was when I was out there in front of the coaches in the dome at Lucas Oil Stadium. That was the only nerve-wracking part really about it.

Once I took a couple of warm-ups and asked one of the special teams coaches that was running the workout on the field, he said that it was a 5-second hang-time, so I could kind of gauge from that punt where I was. Obviously a 5-second hang-time is pretty, that's what you want. So I could kind of gauge where I was from there, then tweaked a couple of things in my warm-ups here and there. After that, it was smooth sailing.

HD: You mentioned participating in the East-West Shrine Game. What did you take away from that week specifically since it was a chance for you to show off your skills for scouts in a game-like situation?

Donahue: It was nice. Most of those guys at the East-West Shrine Game, they were scouts. I did talk to one special teams coach that was there, I believe it was the St. Louis Rams. He stuck around after practice to watch me punt a little bit to returners, and he liked what he saw. I mean obviously, they're probably not going to go after a punter this year, but he gave me encouraging words.

But the biggest feedback I got was at the Combine because the special teams coaches don't really travel to the all-star games. It's mostly scouts and they report back to the special teams coaches, so the most feedback I have gotten was at the

Combine from the special teams coaches themselves. It's really rewarding when you hear, 'Oh, we like how you do this.' Most of the time, they try to grill you on your faults. They're not trying to praise what you do good. They're trying to quiz you and see what you know, what you don't know. That was more rewarding than the East-West game.

HD: Did your experience at the Combine then give you the confidence needed to go forward into a real-game situation in the NFL?

Donahue: The Combine isn't exactly like a real-life situation. It's actually kind of the opposite. Obviously, it's very quiet. There's maybe 1,000 people in the stands, probably less than that, with NFL personnel. It's definitely an eery weird feeling. I remember punting, and it was like dead silent. It was just obviously different than what you're used to.

I think my experience at Iowa is definitely going to help me make that next step into the NFL. Looking back at the 250 or whatever punts I had back in college, I think that's going to help me. That's the most pertinent thing acclimating into the NFL, is college and the experience that I endeared.

HD: Just on that point, when you look back on your career, and specifically on last season as well, do you feel everything went the way you were hoping it would as far as getting to this point was concerned?

Donahue: Yeah. Coming off a strong season or a really good season helps you segway into the NFL. It helps you segway into your next team. Using that experience, using those numbers, using the technique that I've tried to master over my years here, I think that's absolutely going to help me going into the NFL and hopefully earn a starting job and gain the respect of my teammates. As a rookie, you want to stay honed to your fundamentals in everything you do. It's a new system, it's a new league, it's a new pace. For what I've done over the past

year and the years before that, that's only going to help me in my transition.

HD: What have the conversations been like with the teams who have provided you feedback? Do they give you an idea whether they want to draft you at a certain spot or would be willing to take a chance on you should you go undrafted?

Donahue: They haven't said if you come up the board, we'll take you, because obviously with punters, there are only like 1-3 punters that get taken each and every year. It's obviously different from different positions. You'll see Adrian [Clayborn] or Rick [Stanzi], there in a position where teams can afford to pick. There's only going to be one punter on each team. In their eyes, punters aren't exactly the cream of the crop when it comes to the NFL Draft.

Obviously, teams have shown interest that don't need a punter. My agent and I have talked. We know who needs a punter and who doesn't. We have a pretty good idea which teams need a punter. With those teams, it's what do they want or what does their organization want. I'm pretty helpless in this situation because I don't know what they're looking for or anything like that.

HD: You mentioned how only 1-3 punters are going to get drafted. Does that maybe put more pressure on you knowing that you've got to be one of those 1-3 guys as opposed to being for example one of 20 defensive linemen and you know you're getting drafted in the first three rounds?

Donahue: Yeah. Obviously, it's different. It's a little bit frustrating, but it's kind of the way it is, and you just have to deal with the way it is. The best thing I can do is prepare, train, try to show my strengths that I've had the past four years at Iowa to the coaches, and then they're obviously going to take the information they have. It can't be frustrating because you have to realize it's only 1-3 guys

taken. The pressure, it can be taken off by how well you've done for your career.

Obviously, if you're like Adrian and you're in the top 10, you obviously feel better about yourself and you're probably going to be taken in the first three rounds. With punters, that margin of error isn't exactly as big. It's a lot smaller, like three times as small. It's going to be a little bit stressful on draft day, but if not, then hopefully I'll get into a great camp and learn from a very good special teams coach, a very good punter, and use that knowledge to segway myself into that organization or any other organization that is willing to take a chance on me.

HD: What type of advice that you've gotten from former teammates or guys in the NFL has really stuck with you as you've gone through this process?

Donahue: At the beginning of the process, I remember Nate Kaeding came back to Iowa. He was always helping me through the years. I believe it was in early January or February, whenever the season ended, he came into Coach Lester Erb's office and we're watching film. Nate walks in, asks what's going on, Coach then asks 'What's the best advice you can give Ryan in the next few months with working out for teams and stuff like that?'

His advice was don't let anyone change what you do. Don't let anyone change your technique or change who you are because then, you're not going to do as well. You're going to be doing what they want you to do instead of what you want to do. If you have five different teams coming in to work you out, and they each want you to do something different, then you do that your technique is screwed up. Obviously, that has allowed me to stay honed in my technique and stay honed to what kind of punter I am as opposed to what kind of punter they want me to be. He said if they want to draft you and they draft you, then they can start tweaking with this or that because obviously,

you're working for them.

HD: Along those lines, have teams asked you about doing different things like handling the holding duties on PATs or field goals, or being a kickoff specialist if a team's place-kicker has a regressing leg?

Donahue: Yeah, absolutely. It's funny. On the Combine web site, it said I never held before. Me and my kicking coaches all got a pretty good chuckle out of that. Teams know. They watch the film and know what you can and can't do. Out of the 100 holds I had in college, I only dropped one ball, and I think that's something teams notice. They've all talked to me about holding and making sure I can hold. Obviously, I can.

Then a couple of teams have mentioned to me the possibility of being a kickoff specialist. I mean, that's something that I can work on. I've been the back-up for four years at Iowa with kicking off. It's not something I've worked on specifically because I've worked on punting and used punting to take me to where I want to go, so it's obviously a bonus for them if I can kick off. If that's what they want, some teams want to work with me kicking off, too. It's definitely a possibility.

HD: I was just going to say, I not only remember you handling the holding duties, but I'm pretty sure you were the holder for Daniel Murray when he kicked that field goal against Penn State in 2008.

Donahue: Yes, I was. Yes, I was.

HD: As far as the draft goes, what are your plans? Are you going to watch it alone, or with family? Are you even going to watch it or just avoid it completely until you get the call?

Donahue: Yeah, I'm not going to pay attention to it specifically. I have people who are a lot more into the draft than I am. My mom and dad, they're obviously very excited about it. If that comes, I'm going to trust them to know

because I can guarantee you my mom is going to have a sheet highlighted with all the teams that might pick me up. I'll leave it up to her to say, 'Oh, Ryan. It might happen here, or happen here.' I'm not going to watch on the couch with a bag of Cheetos hoping I get picked.

HD: With the ongoing lockout situation in the NFL, do you have a plan in place in the event you didn't get drafted, or even if you do and knowing that you wouldn't be allowed anywhere near your team's facilities until a deal was reached?

Donahue: Every single guy needs to have a plan. Guys in the NFL now, they might be a little more acclimated to how everything in the NFL is. The rookies don't, so we need to train as if we're training with them. We need to train as if we're training during the season, or in the offseason better yet because that's when most of the work gets done. So it really comes down to how self-disciplined you are training by yourself.

You don't want to be this guy going into the NFL as a rookie and you're out of shape or you're not performing like you should and then you get your teammates on you. That's not really something a rookie really wants, so if anything, I'm going to have to work even harder just to be in shape this whole time. At some point in time, this NFL lockout is going to end, and when that happens, you want to be ready. It's unfortunate that it's happening like this this year, but if you want to be a professional, you need to train like a professional.

HD: I looked this up – if you are to get drafted this week, you will be the first Iowa punter since Reggie Roby to be picked in the NFL Draft. I'm sure that's a name you heard quite a bit during your five years in the program. So what does it mean to possibly hear your name in the same sentence with someone like Roby who not only had a great college career, but a solid NFL career as well?

Donahue: To even be in the same breath as Reggie Roby, that's an honor. He obviously gained so many more accolades than I have. He was in the NFL for years and years, and that's something that you can never really ask for to be named going along with him. You have a guy like Jason Baker who didn't get drafted obviously, but made it into the NFL. He's sustained a long and successful career, and it's amazing that he didn't even get drafted. But some guys fall through the cracks, some guys get picked up right away. If I could be mentioned with those two guys in 10 years, I will consider myself a successful punter. But as of this point, I don't think I have proved a whole lot yet.

HD: I just want to clear one thing up – after the Combine, aside from the Pro Day in Iowa City, have you been in your home state of Illinois for the most part?

Donahue: No. Actually, I've been in Iowa City the whole time. This is where I'm training. I'm training with Coach Doyle. Teams need to come out here to work me out, so I've been training here. This is my home base. This has been my home base for the past five years and it's something where it's neat to train where you're used to, in my opinion.

Obviously, some guys go to different places like California, Florida, stuff like that. But that's something they can do for themselves, and those performance places, they don't exactly train kickers and punters specifically. I'm my own worst critic, so obviously I think I could be my own coach at this point. I've worked with a couple of kicking coaches that pull me when I need some advice, specifically with punting situations, and the whole process, stuff like that.

HD: Once the dust settles if you will, and you're finally in a position where you're with a team and they can start evaluating you as a punter, what gives you the confidence that you can be as effective a punter in the NFL as you were for four seasons at Iowa?

Donahue: Obviously, that's going to have to happen day-by-day. When the camps usually start and stuff like that, when the preseason games begin, that's obviously a learning experience. When I feel like I can successfully do something, with my craft, I believe I can. At Iowa, I started four years, every year. I have a lot of experience. That's something that's not going to be one of my weaknesses.

Like I said before, I have to use that experience in the NFL. I don't think there will be a point in time where I say, 'Yeah, I'm ready to do this,' but obviously right now, I'm ready to step into the NFL and play in big-time games because I played in a lot of big-time games in college. That's not to say that the NFL is the same way, because I know it's not.

But one thing with NFL teams is they like to directional punt. That's not something we specifically did at Iowa. I usually made the decision on the field where I wanted to go with it, judging on the wind, direction and everything like that, and their return scheme. I expected to make that decision on the field and go to the coaches. In the NFL, they want to make the call from the sidelines, not judging where the wind is going. That's something I'm going to have to work with and something I'm going to have to improve on stepping in as a professional.