

8/30/2011: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' season-opener against Tennessee Tech with the local media during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2011 at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – The word of the day around the Iowa football complex Tuesday was “eager.” With the Hawkeyes’ season-opener against Tennessee Tech on the horizon, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz and his players weren’t shy in their eagerness to finally have a game to prepare for this week.

On paper, this appears as a game the Hawkeyes should have no business losing. Just like last season’s first opponent in Eastern Illinois, Tennessee Tech is a member of the Ohio Valley Conference, which is part of the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). Unlike Eastern Illinois however, the Golden Eagles come to Kinnick Stadium Sept. 3 with a plethora of

experience – 21 starters on both sides of the football, to be exact.

The number '21' is one the players were fully aware of on Tuesday. Senior cornerback Shaun Prater belted out '21' when answering a question about Tennessee Tech's experience.

"The last team we faced that brought back that many starters was UNI," Prater said, referring to Iowa's near-collapse against the Panthers in 2009. "They came in confident. Most teams tend to come in thinking too much."

It's not only the starters Tennessee Tech brings back. The Golden Eagles have also played seven FBS teams over the past four seasons since Watson Brown took over the program in 2007. In fact, their first two games last season came on the road against Arkansas, who played in the Sugar Bowl, and TCU, who went a perfect 13-0 and won the Rose Bowl. Both the Razorbacks and Horned Frogs won those games decisively before Tennessee Tech ultimately finished 2010 with a 5-6 record.

"We're facing a real challenge," Ferentz said. "I think [our players] have got great respect for Tennessee Tech. We'll have to be at our best on Saturday."

Derby set as back-up

Four days after the release of Iowa's 2-deep, Ferentz said Tuesday that redshirt freshman A.J. Derby will likely be the back-up quarterback to James Vandenberg on Saturday when the Hawkeyes play the Golden Eagles. Derby has been in competition with junior quarterback John Wienke for the back-up job.

"If we were playing tomorrow, he'll be the next man in," Ferentz said about the Iowa City native. "I expect it to be that way Saturday. I think he has improved, too."

While the drama surrounding the position revolves around depth, there's Vandenberg himself. Unlike his predecessor

Ricky Stanzi, Vandenberg said he's barely recognized in classes by fellow UI students.

Being incognito in a lecture hall seems all right with him.

"I'm in all these science where I'm one of 300 people and I'm sitting in a really packed lecture room," Vandenberg said. "Honestly, most of my professors don't know who I am. Most of the people in class don't know who I am. When I'm in those smaller classes, I think people kind of put it together.

"I wear sweats every day and drive a moped, but I don't think I get overly noticed around campus."

Special teams appears resolved... for now

An updated 2-deep handed out Tuesday prior to Ferentz's press conference featured names in the return game. As suspected, junior free safety Micah Hyde will return punts for the Hawkeyes, while junior wide receiver Keenan Davis and senior defensive back Jordan Bernstine will handle kickoff returns.

Hyde beat out senior wide receiver Marvin McNutt for the punt returning duties. The Fostoria, Ohio native had two big returns on defense last season – one touchdown scored off a lateral following a Tyler Sash interception, the other being the game-winning pick-six for the Hawkeyes in the 27-24 win over Missouri in the Insight Bowl.

"It's a great honor that they have trust in me back there catching punts," Hyde said. "All I got to do is just catch the ball. Don't turn it over, and I'll be fine."

Davis returned kickoffs for the Hawkeyes last season. But for Bernstine, it's a shot at finally playing some significant minutes. Ferentz raved about the Des Moines native's progress during fall camp, and said Bernstine would be on the field whenever Iowa goes to a nickel defense.

Meanwhile, the kicking situation seems to be better than it

was two weeks ago at Iowa's Kids Day practice. Ferentz said with both sophomore kicker Mike Meyer and junior kicker Trent Mossbrucker making progress, the door is open for possibly redshirting Marshall Koehn, a true freshman walk-on that Ferentz said is neck-and-neck with the two other kickers.

"Right now, all three of those guys are competing well," Ferentz said. "That's one positive thing I can talk about. You see the ball go through the goalpost, you know that's good."

Meyer will handle all of Iowa's kicking duties against Tennessee Tech.

Injury update

The defense will be missing a few pieces this weekend against the Golden Eagles. Redshirt freshman defensive tackle Carl Davis is out with an undisclosed injury, while sophomore cornerback B.J. Lowery will miss at least a month following an arm injury suffered during fall camp. Ferentz said he is optimistic Davis could be back next week for Iowa's game at Iowa State.

Meanwhile, sophomore offensive lineman Nolan MacMillan is still out with a sports hernia injury. In his place will be junior offensive lineman Matt Tobin, who has worked with the first-unit O-line since an injury to redshirt freshman Brandon Scherff occurred.

Then there's sophomore fullback Brad Rogers, who still hasn't practiced with the team since a heart condition discovered last December following failed cardiology tests resulted in him missing the Insight Bowl, spring practice, and now fall camp. No timetable has been established for when Rogers will be cleared to return to the gridiron.

"The Brad Rogers situation really hasn't come to any resolution yet," Ferentz said. "I think we're making progress. We're going to take that week-to-week, day-to-day, see how

that goes. He's fine. He's out of harm's way, doing fine there."

Tumilson, other war veterans to be honored

An announcement was made Tuesday that Iowa will hold a tribute to U.S. war veterans during either of the last two home games against Michigan or Michigan State in November to coincide with Veteran's Day. This news comes days after a public proposal made to honor Jon Tumilson, a U.S. Navy SEAL from Rockford, Iowa who died while serving in Afghanistan earlier this month and had a Labrador retriever named Hawkeye that was photographed laying in front of Tumilson's casket during his funeral service.

In a release sent out by the UI on Tuesday, Iowa athletics director Gary Barta said the decision to have this take place in November as opposed to this weekend was "deliberate."

"We wanted to be respectful of Jon's family and friends, and others who are still grieving," Barta said in a statement.