

9/20/2011: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against ULM with the local media during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2011, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – With the 2011 season only one-quarter of the way through, now is too early to say whether or not the Iowa Hawkeyes' 31-27 win over Pittsburgh last weekend proves to be a defining moment this fall.

But that doesn't mean nothing was gained.

"Hopefully this will be a learning process," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said during his weekly press conference on Tuesday. "Maybe this will serve as an impetus. Time will tell."

Defensively, the Hawkeyes found themselves making critical stops at opportune times, something senior defensive tackle

Mike Daniels said seemed bigger now than as those stops were unfolding before the capacity crowd at Kinnick Stadium.

Iowa had a goal-line stop that forced Pittsburgh to kick a 24-yard field goal, then created a turnover on downs during Pittsburgh's next drive.

Sophomore linebacker Christian Kirksey went as far as saying the defense "grew up."

"Mentally, we were seeing plays, not really tripping off the first play that happened," Kirksey said. "Like if a bad play happened, we were not really, 'We should have did that.' We just moved on to the next play and grew up as men."

Offensively, the Big Ten's Player of the Week went from struggling mightily to posting career numbers, as junior quarterback James Vandenberg made himself a household name last weekend with 399 yards passing and three touchdown passes that all came in the fourth quarter.

"We were just able to get things going in that fourth quarter, and I think everybody was just kind of in a zone," Vandenberg said.

Now at 2-1, the Hawkeyes prepare for their final non-conference game on Sept. 24 against UL-Monroe (1-2). The good news for Iowa is that it does have a bye next week before opening Big Ten play on Oct. 8 at Penn State. However, Ferentz admitted this week would be more unusual in terms of preparation for the Warhawks on both sides of the ball.

"It's going to eat up some practice time today, tomorrow, all week, to make sure we get everything covered," Ferentz said.

To go or not go no-huddle

One of the underlying stories from Iowa's comeback win over Pittsburgh was the use of the no-huddle offense during the comeback, something Ferentz described as being "academic" at

that point in the game.

Although the no-huddle proved to be very successful in providing Iowa with four second-half touchdowns, it's something Ferentz doesn't want to use by design at the start of games, which has the approval of some offensive players such as senior offensive lineman Adam Gettis.

"I would say, as an offensive lineman, I wouldn't like it too much," Gettis said. "We want to run the ball. That's what we're built to do. We're big, fat guys. We're trying to run the ball. I'd like to run a little I-formation, a little zone blocking, first. Then we'll see what happens."

Vandenberg also reiterated Tuesday that it wouldn't be something fans should come into this weekend's game, or any future game this season, expecting to see unless a situation similar to what the Hawkeyes had last weekend occurs again.

"I think it's something that we just have a lot more confidence in now," Vandenberg said. "I think we had confidence in it before, but we finally got a chance to do it on Saturday against somebody else."

"We need it, we'll use it, but I don't see us doing that full-time anytime soon."

Hyde switch not permanent

Ferentz was asked once again Tuesday about his decision last week to switch junior Micah Hyde back to cornerback after Hyde had made the transition during the offseason over to free safety. The move ended up paying off for the Hawkeyes last weekend, as Hyde came away with two interceptions of Pittsburgh quarterback Tino Sunseri.

It was a move that senior cornerback Shaun Prater said everyone in the secondary knew would be coming following a triple-overtime loss to Iowa State on Sept. 10.

"[Defensive backs coach Phil Parker] has been telling us all since the summer, 'We're going to try some guys here, and if things don't work out, we're going to keep switching,'" Prater said. "This is nothing new. Everybody saw it coming. Whatever works best, we're going to play that way."

One thing to consider would be where sophomore cornerback B.J. Lowery fits in whenever he returns from his wrist injury that first plagued him during fall camp. For now though, Hyde moving back opened up an opportunity for sophomore Tanner Miller to work with the first team defense at free safety. Miller made his first career start for the Hawkeyes against Pittsburgh.

"You could tell the difference, just with the coach's attitude towards me," Miller said about working with the first-string in practice. "He was definitely getting on me a lot more with any mistake that I made. He always did that. But you could tell in his attitude that he was trying to get me in the position I needed to be to be ready to go."

Hyde is listed as the starting cornerback for this upcoming game against ULM, but Ferentz made clear Saturday that the switch back to corner for Hyde isn't permanent.

"We'll see how things go," Ferentz said. "I know this week he'll be out there and we'll kind of go from there. It's nice to have that position flexibility."

Special teams improvement

One area Ferentz displayed approval about when discussing last weekend's game was the improved performance on kick coverage from the special teams.

In the fourth quarter, Iowa got key stops in kickoff coverage from both Joe Audelhelm and Tom Donatell. Audelhelm's tackle came with Iowa trailing 27-24, and it made Pittsburgh start on its own 20. The tackle by Donatell came shortly after the

Hawkeyes took the lead on Pittsburgh, and it forced the Panthers to start their final offensive drive from their own 9-yard line.

"We had been letting down our team so much the last couple of weeks," Donatell said. "We thought, 'We needed to make a play.' Those last two kickoffs showed it."

Ferentz said in order for Iowa to remain competitive throughout the course of the season, it would need what it got last weekend from players such as Audelhelm and Donatell on a consistent basis.

"We can't be riding the roller coaster and putting our defense out there midfield," Ferentz said.

Players react to Davis' departure

Tuesday marked the first opportunity for members of the defense to react publicly to the news of senior linebacker Bruce Davis' decision on Monday to leave the team for personal reasons.

The news of Davis' departure came as a complete shock.

"I was completely caught off guard," sophomore linebacker James Morris said. "But at the same time, Bruce was our teammate. He's an adult, and we respect his decision."

In fact, Daniels first heard the news Tuesday when the question was brought up, and it left him in somewhat of a disbelief.

"That's a bummer," Daniels said. "It's always bad to lose a teammate and to have somebody leave the team for whatever reasons they may have. I'll pray for him, and hope for the best for him with whatever he decides to do."

According to the release sent out Monday, Davis was still listed as a student and Ferentz had said that he still

intended to graduate on time this coming December. He had contributed on special teams for the Hawkeyes this season after tearing his ACL in 2010, and was even listed as the back-up at middle linebacker to Morris, a spot Ferentz said Tuesday now belongs to senior Tyler Nielsen, who is the team's starter at outside linebacker.

Do a little dance

It was a humorous moment from last weekend's game that made Daniels blush Tuesday afternoon when it was brought up again by reporters.

In the fourth quarter, just before Pittsburgh's turnover on downs, Daniels recorded a sack on Sunseri and did a bit of a dance afterwards that revved up the Kinnick Stadium crowd.

Daniels said showing that emotion following the sack was a bit out of character, even for him.

"That was a straight black out moment," Daniels said. "I've had a few of those. I need to calm it down a bit."

The dance is something Daniels said he doesn't want to do again, but it did lead to some chuckles in the film room over the weekend.

"There were a couple of laughs," Daniels said. "Everybody understood it was a big moment in the game. It was emotional, but you have to make sure you be a little more in control. You don't want to waste all your energy, and you don't want to possibly get a penalty."