

9/29/2011: Iowa football notebook



Kirk Ferentz, Sept. 29, 2011

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa — Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz began Thursday's gathering with a bit of his typical dry humor, joking how the Hawkeyes would start blitzing half the time on defense and always be operating out of no-huddle on offense.

But when it came down to being serious, he and his two coordinators — defensive coordinator Norm Parker and offensive coordinator Ken O'Keefe — all believe progress has been made and will continue to be made over the course of this bye week and Big Ten play, which starts for Iowa on Oct. 8 against Penn State in State College, Pa.

For the starters, it's a chance to heal up from any bumps, bruises or other minor injuries that may have been sustained during the non-conference portion of the season. For the ones who don't see much of the field on Saturdays, this is the week Ferentz and his coaching staff are working them hardcore.

"We treat this a little bit like early December," Ferentz said, referencing to what has been a bowl prep period for the Hawkeyes during each of the last 10 seasons, nine of which

have resulted in bowl appearances.

Ferentz updates injured player statuses

Ferentz also provided a rundown of updates on injured players Thursday, none of whom would be expected to play next week. This list includes sophomore cornerback B.J. Lowery, who Ferentz said needs at least 2-3 more weeks still after suffering a wrist injury back in fall camp. Ferentz had previously hinted at Lowery possibly being back in time for the Hawkeyes' showdown with the Nittany Lions.

He also said that both sophomore offensive lineman Nolan MacMillan and sophomore fullback Brad Rogers have been cleared medically to return to the practice field and have been limited during practice. MacMillan had been sidelined by a sports hernia injury he is slowly recovering from, while Rogers had been held out completely since last winter when a heart condition was discovered prior to the Hawkeyes' 2010 Insight Bowl win over Missouri.

The other name that came up was that of true freshman running Mika'il McCall, who suffered an ankle injury in Iowa's season-opener against Tennessee Tech on Sept. 3. Ferentz said there was a small chance McCall could return sometime in November depending upon his rehabilitation, but added that the odds of that happening are doubtful.

"Mentally, we have to assume that he's not going to make it back," Ferentz said. "I think given the position he plays, it's probably unrealistic. But you never know."

"If he were able to come back in November, we might have a decision to make."



Norm Parker, Sept. 29, 2011

Parker likes progress defense has made last few weeks

When asked to assess his defense through four games, Parker gave a game-by-game synopsis and basically said the last two games had been signs of progress following a disastrous outing at Iowa State, where the Hawkeyes surrendered 44 points defensively and lost in triple overtime.

"I see improvement really at every segment," Parker said. "Three weeks ago, if we had to make an adjustment, that was like a major crisis. Now, it does not fall into place like dominoes, but at least it gets closer to falling like dominoes."

One thing Parker noted was the inexperience. He described the relative inexperience that comes with three of the four main linebackers being sophomores as a result of not having enough of a memory bank yet. He also made clear the younger players need to continue to make strides since they don't have veterans like Adrian Clayborn, Christian Ballard, and Karl Klug around to guide them any longer.

"The thing that is good is that they are young, they are eager to learn, they are willing to learn," Parker said. "They are not afraid to say, 'Coach, I blew it. Teach me how to do it.'

"They can't be more willing than they are."

Parker takes his jabs at offense

Before walking away from the dais Thursday, Parker got in some

shots about offensive game planning. Not Iowa's in particular, but in general.

When asked about having to match up against no-huddle offenses, Parker noted what he sees as a major discrepancy between college football and the NFL. In the NFL, defenses have to be given a chance to change personnel if offenses change personnel while running no-huddle. In college, defenses don't have the same liberty.

"I think it's physically harder to play defense than offense. It just is," Parker said. "The more plays they can run at you, the more they can wear you down, the more they can get you to break down mentally. That's the whole thing – how fast they can go.

"It's fast-break basketball. Throw away the shot clock."

He didn't stop there, though. Parker said a '3-2 game' would be entertaining to him. When the topic of mobile quarterbacks was brought up, mainly due to their being some good ones in the Big Ten that are on Iowa's schedule this season, Parker went out of his way to describe them as 'single-wing tailbacks.'

"It's like going back to the old days," Parker said. "They run. They pass. Some of them even kick. They are single-wing tailbacks. That's who they are."



Ken O'Keefe, Sept. 29, 2011

O'Keefe showing confidence in Vandenberg

One thing made abundantly clear by O'Keefe on Thursday was his faith in junior quarterback James Vandenberg leading the Iowa offense. He said when Iowa is running no-huddle or a 2-minute drill like it was in the second half against Pittsburgh and on the opening series against ULM, Vandenberg has 'an enormous amount of freedom' when it comes to decision-making.

"He knows the packages that we use. He knows the protections that we need to be in," O'Keefe said. "He knows the routes, the various coverages that he might be seeing, and it's a lot easier for him out there once he starts seeing it to make adjustments than it is to actually even make it from the sideline.

"He has enormous freedom there."

O'Keefe was also asked why the Hawkeyes decided to go no-huddle on their opening drive against the Warhawks last weekend. He said much of the reasoning had to do with ULM operating a 3-3-5 scheme that made it so Iowa couldn't solely depend on specific personnel packages. O'Keefe even went as far as to say the Hawkeyes' game plan for ULM was one of the simplest they have had in years.

"We just decided to simplify it and let James go to work," O'Keefe said. "It worked out O.K."

O'Keefe on receiving game

One aspect of the offense that has really emerged over the past couple of weeks has been the play of Iowa's receiving corps, a group Ferentz admitted he was uncertain about coming out of fall camp. The player there was never any concern with was senior wide receiver Marvin McNutt, who has four touchdown catches already this season and is now just two shy of becoming Iowa's all-time leader.

What makes that feat even more remarkable is that McNutt came to Iowa as a quarterback, only to switch to wide receiver during his redshirt freshman season in 2008.

“To be perfectly honest with you, I don’t think we knew how well he could run in the open field after a catch when he was just playing quarterback,” O’Keefe said. “But he has got a unique set of hands and ability to use them.”

Two other receivers – junior Keenan Davis and redshirt freshman Kevonte Martin-Manley – have helped Iowa establish a formidable trio, one that has become a focal point of the offense since the Hawkeyes overcame a 21-point deficit against Pittsburgh back on Sept. 17.

Martin-Manley was asked about at length to O’Keefe, who said he has developed into a threat as Iowa’s No. 3 receiver. Through four games, Martin-Manley has made 14 catches for 181 yards receiving and has three touchdowns, two of which came in the Hawkeyes’ victory over Pittsburgh.

“I think his production is an example of how far he has come,” O’Keefe said.

[Ferentz/Parker/O’Keefe press conference transcript \(9/29/2011\)](#)