

10/11/2011: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Northwestern with the local media during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2011, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – When the Iowa Hawkeyes take to the Kinnick Stadium turf on Oct. 15, they will be met with what has been their biggest mental obstacle to date in Northwestern.

The Wildcats are currently on a three-game slide, and find itself tied for last place in the Legends Division at 0-2, a half-game behind 0-1 Iowa. However, Northwestern also comes in having won five of its last six meetings with the Hawkeyes, including streaks of three straight overall and three straight in games played at Kinnick Stadium.

In fact, in each of the three Northwestern victories over the

past three seasons, Iowa held leads of 17-3 (2008), 10-0 (2009) and (17-7) on the Wildcats before letting all three contests slip away.

“They just capitalized on our mistakes,” senior defensive end Broderick Binns said about the games that have comprised this three-game skid. “That’s something that we try to harp here – just let the other team shoot themselves in the foot and we capitalize on it. But the last three years, Northwestern has done a good job of doing that to us.”

When asked to give an explanation for why Northwestern has had so much success in recent memory, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz simply said the Wildcats had played better in all three games.

“You can slice it, dice it,” Ferentz said. “Injuries, that’s part of the game. At the end of the day, they played better in all three of those games, and they won.”

Offensive identity

The question of offensive identity came up following last weekend’s loss to Penn State, and was a brief topic of conversation again on Tuesday.

Once again, the Hawkeyes opened up with some no-huddle offense. But it wasn’t completely utilized from start to finish against the Nittany Lions. A big part of Penn State’s game plan was to take away the deep pass, and as a result, junior quarterback James Vandenberg found himself throwing a lot of shorter routes against the Nittany Lion defense.

“A lot of teams don’t want to give up the big play, and they definitely didn’t,” Vandenberg said. “They just played good defense and didn’t let you make easy plays. We knew that. We’re trying to correct that and move forward.”

There were also questions regarding the play-calling near the end of the first half, with Iowa possessing the ball at its

own 20-yard line with 1:47 on the clock. Iowa began the possession by running the football, then attempted to execute a 2-minute drill once it got beyond the 30, only for the series to end in disarray.

"Our thinking was try to move the ball out of there," Ferentz said. "It wasn't like we really lit the world on fire in the game at that point. If we can move it out, we are a little bit more comfortable and we take some shots."

As for whether there is issue with finding an identity, Vandenberg said he doesn't see it.

"I don't think we're really looking for identity. We're just trying to score points," Vandenberg said. "We don't care if we run for 300 [yards] or throw for 300. We need to put points on the board and help our defense out. That's something we didn't do on Saturday."

Dealing with Persa

Dan Persa has had Iowa's number. In 2009, he came in for an injured Mike Kafka and did enough to lead Northwestern to a stunning 17-10 win over an undefeated Hawkeye team. Then last season, he led two fourth-quarter touchdown drives to beat Iowa before rupturing his Achilles' tendon.

"That guy can play the game," senior defensive tackle Mike Daniels said. "He can move. He can run really well. He's an accurate passer. A smart football player. He's shifty."

On Tuesday, Ferentz put Persa in the category of a "big-time" quarterback, even comparing him to past Big Ten signal-callers such as Purdue's Drew Brees and Indiana's Antwaan Randle El, both of whom had an enormous impact for their respective teams during Ferentz's early seasons as Iowa's head coach.

"He played as well against us last year as any quarterbacks that we have faced, if you go back 13 years," Ferentz said of

Persa's performance that afternoon, which consisted of 32-of-43 passing for 318 yards, two fourth-quarter touchdowns, and an interception.

Ferentz mentioned Persa's ability to run east and west, and while keeping contain against the mobile QB will prove critical, Binns made mention of his ability to run up the middle as something Iowa needs to be prepared for this weekend.

"I know Persa likes to escape inside the pocket, so we just got to make sure that as a D-line, we stay in our rushing lanes and make sure we don't give him the outside or inside because he's very escapable," Binns said.

The return of Rogers

One of the few positive takeaways for Iowa last weekend was sophomore fullback Brad Rogers returning to the field, marking the first time he had played in a game since doctors discovered a heart condition last December that back then kept him out of the 2010 Insight Bowl.

It was a long road back for Rogers, who spent most of the summer riding a bike or running on a treadmill while the majority of his teammates participated in the team's summer workout program. His first time putting on pads came during the bye week, which is when he first sensed a return could be realistic.

"It was more of an excitement that I had been waiting for, for so long," Rogers said about being on the field in uniform for the first time last weekend. "I kind of felt like I never skipped a beat."

Rogers ended up being the No. 2 fullback against Penn State, and was being used primarily on third-down situations when Iowa was in shotgun, giving sophomore running back Marcus Coker a chance to catch his breath on the sidelines.

"He'll come in sometimes in those blocking situations, so it's definitely nice," Coker said about having Rogers back.

Although Iowa's offense has featured more no-huddle, meaning less instances where a fullback is utilized, that's not keeping Rogers from being determined to be the No. 1 guy many envisioned he'd be this season before it was determined his heart condition would keep him from playing in games this season.

"I just got to improve on things from last week," Rogers said. "Pass blocking, run blocking, whatever they tell me I need to improve on."

Recalling 2007 win

Northwestern's five victories the last six seasons against Iowa has been well-documented. What might get lost in that, however, is the lone Iowa victory, which came at Ryan Field back in 2007.

Fifth-year seniors on this year's squad were true freshmen back then going through redshirt seasons, so not all of them made the trip to Evanston, Ill., that afternoon. One player who didn't make the trip, but still had a somewhat vivid memory of that win was senior defensive end Lebron Daniel.

"I was watching it, and I remember we were down at first, and we ended up coming back," Daniel said. "It was good to see. It was a while ago, though."

It may have been a while ago, but Daniel's recollection is an accurate portrayal.

Ironically, Iowa would win that game much like it has lost the last three meetings with Northwestern. The Wildcats dominated the first half and jumped out to an early 14-0 lead that was 14-7 at halftime. However, Iowa would regain its swagger in the second half and thanks in large part to a career-

performance by then-quarterback Jake Christensen, the Hawkeyes left Ryan Field that afternoon with a 28-17 victory.

Marvin McNutt, who was being redshirted that season and back then was at the bottom of the quarterback depth chart, recalled traveling to Evanston with the team for that game, but nothing much beyond that.

"I wasn't playing, and we won," McNutt said. "I mean, there was nothing special. It was the last time we beat Northwestern. That's basically what you can say about it."

Being developmental

The latter stages of Ferentz's press conference went deep into discussion about Iowa being a developmental program, with developmental being a term Ferentz himself has used in years past, and even on occasion this season to describe the program's current state.

He also used phrases such as "an ongoing process" and "a race against time" when discussing how development progresses through the course of a season at a place such as Iowa.

"That's the nature of our program, and most teams are like that," Ferentz said. "There are a few teams that maybe have a different situation, but that's the fun of football, and that's the challenge of football, how you can handle that situation."

He then used the platform to emphasize how Northwestern being anything like it was pre-1995 is nothing more than perception now, mainly due to the development being done by its coaches over the years to keep it a competitive program in the Big Ten. Ferentz specifically mentioned Northwestern losing in overtime in the 2010 Outback Bowl to an Auburn team that emerged from the bottom of the preseason top 25 to win last season's national championship.

"These guys have played well the last three years, and that's the nature of college football – what can you do with what you got," Ferentz said regarding Northwestern. "We have all got the same amount of time."

Build-up for Northwestern

It might not be a rivalry, but there has certainly been a build-up for this week's game in Iowa City. For one thing, the university is promoting its inaugural "ANF Day" with pregame festivities around Kinnick Stadium, and this is the second year Iowa is holding a home game where it's encouraging fans to alternate the sections with black and gold attire depending on where they sit.

Oh, and then there's that aforementioned fact that this week's opponent has had Iowa's number the past few seasons.

Iowa's approach has always been (and still is) the whole "one-game-at-a-time" mantra that is cliché in sports. But even when taking this approach, players admit it has come up in conversations.

"I worked at Hy-Vee as my summer job, and people would just be walking through there knowing who I was and just telling me like, 'Make sure we beat Northwestern this year,'" Daniel said. "That was the one thing I heard all summer. Everyone wants to see that, and we want to do that. We want to get it done."

Senior cornerback Shaun Prater mentioned on Tuesday how he has even had people reaching out to him via Facebook with comments about getting the proverbial Northwestern monkey off Iowa's back.

"Honestly, as a player, as a team, we're all thinking about how these guys have beat us the past three years," Prater said. "I haven't won against these guys, so what is it? What are we doing that's different? Hopefully we can switch it up,

we can play as a team and get this 'W,' no matter what it takes."

Division play heating up

Iowa's game against Northwestern will be its first Legends Division contest under the Big Ten's new format. But it isn't the only one taking place this weekend. In fact, all five conference games on this week's slate are intra-divisional match-ups.

The most significant of note might be the other Legends Division game, featuring No. 11 Michigan and No. 23 Michigan State. Michigan currently sits atop the division with a 2-0 conference mark, but the Spartans are coming off a bye week that followed a 10-7 win over Ohio State in their Big Ten opener. Meanwhile, all six teams in the Leaders Division all play divisional opponents.

Nebraska and Minnesota, who both have byes this week, square off in Minneapolis next week.