

10/18/2011: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Indiana with the local media during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2011, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Marvin McNutt was a popular name Tuesday during Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz's weekly press conference Tuesday, and for good reason.

In the fourth quarter of the Hawkeyes' 41-31 win over Northwestern on Oct. 15, McNutt hauled in a 35-yard touchdown reception that tied the school record of 21 career touchdown catches held by both Danan Hughes and Tim Dwight. What made McNutt accomplishing this even more astounding is that he came to Iowa in 2007 to play quarterback and made the switch to receiver in 2008 after Ricky Stanzi had emerged past Jake Christensen as the Hawkeyes' starting quarterback.

Reflecting back upon the move Tuesday, Ferentz couldn't recall who first had the idea, but he did say that McNutt never had an issue with making that switch. He also said once McNutt was able to adjust his stamina, he really began to learn on the fly.

"As Ricky emerged, it became more of a natural flow for him to seek out a position where he had a chance to get on the field," Ferentz said.

McNutt has five touchdown catches at the 2011 season's halfway point. Junior quarterback James Vandenberg has thrown seven of those 21 touchdowns McNutt's direction, and said McNutt played a big role in keeping him grounded two years ago when he came in for an injured Stanzi. Vandenberg also credited McNutt's knowledge of Iowa's offense from a quarterback's perspective that has helped him along the way.

"He knows the defenses, and knows the reads and the checks," Vandenberg said. "It makes everything a lot smoother out there with him knowing all that stuff."

Three years after making the switch and just two years after catching his first career touchdown against Arkansas State in 2009, McNutt chooses to remain humble and not allow the success to get to him.

"Right now, I still feel like I've got a lot of improving to do," McNutt said. "Every week, you go through this process, and you find things. You continue to push yourself through the process, and hopefully you get to where you want to be."

This type of attitude has not only rubbed off on McNutt, but on other wide receivers as well. Junior wideout Keenan Davis, who described McNutt as being like an older brother to him during the team's Media Day last August, finds McNutt's work ethic commendable and said it motivates him as well.

"For him to say that, for him to think that, it's going to

make him a better and more established receiver," Davis said. "That helps me, knowing that I have a lot to work on, so it's good to hear that from him."

Belcher's drop revisited

With Indiana visiting Kinnick Stadium for Iowa's Homecoming game on Oct. 22, another topic of conversation Tuesday was the end of last year's meeting between the Hawkeyes and Hoosiers in Bloomington.

Iowa came away with an 18-13 victory over Indiana, but just barely. On the Hoosiers' final offensive play of the game, wide receiver Damarlo Belcher appeared to catch what would've been a game-winning touchdown in the back of the end zone, only for the ball to fall out of his hands and the play to be ruled an incomplete pass that turned the ball over on downs back to the Hawkeyes.

Senior cornerback Shaun Prater recalled the receiver he covered running a wheel route, and Belcher making a move inside that allowed him to get open and initially get his hands on the ball before it came out.

"I was trying to run over there to smack the ball, because he had the ball pretty high," Prater said. "When he was falling down, he hit his back, and the ball popped out.

"Luckily, he dropped the ball and we were able to get the win."

Junior cornerback Micah Hyde was also on the field when the play occurred and admitted he initially held his head down in disappointment thinking Belcher caught the ball.

"I figured a ball like that, that type of receiver, it's a catch," Hyde said. "Maybe I heard the crowd or something, I don't know. But it was shocking.

As for this weekend's contest, nothing is definitive whether

Belcher will be able to play after a knee injury suffered last weekend against Wisconsin sidelined him for the second half of the Hoosiers' 59-7 loss to the Badgers.

Interceptions aplenty among secondary

Sophomore free safety Tanner Miller tied a school-record held by Adam Shada when he returned a Dan Persa interception 98 yards for a touchdown during the first quarter of last Saturday's contest. He has also gotten plenty of feedback on the play he made.

"I had quite a few texts," Miller said. "Most of it was family. They were all happy for me and wanted to congratulate me. It was good to talk to them and have the support of me in my community."

With Miller recording his pick-six, he may have also thrown his name into a heated battle between Prater and Hyde over who leads the Hawkeyes in interceptions this season. Hyde currently leads with three interceptions, but Prater's lone interception this fall was also a pick-six during Iowa's 34-7 win over Tennessee Tech on Sept. 3.

"I'm sure Tanner's going to want some say in it," Hyde said. "As long as we're all competing and we're all making plays, that's the best you can ask for. Whoever has the most pick-sixes in the end gets a dinner, or whatever."

Now that Miller, Prater and Hyde all have a career pick-six to their names, all three defensive backs joked Tuesday about the pressure being on senior strong safety Jordan Bernstine to come up with one.

"Jordan's too busy making all these tackles and being a great player," Prater said. "I think the thing with Jordan is once he gets that first interception, they'll all start coming in."

Year of the ankle

Ankle injuries have become rampant in recent weeks. Senior linebacker Tyler Nielsen had been dealing with one throughout the season he initially suffered against Iowa State last month.

Sophomore linebacker James Morris and senior defensive tackle Thomas Nardo both missed last weekend's game against Northwestern due to ankle injuries, and senior defensive end Lebron Daniel came out of the game in the third quarter with an ankle injury. All three were listed on the 2-deep released earlier this week.

Daniel didn't start against Northwestern, but did record three tackles against the Wildcats before hobbling off the field with the injury and being replaced for good by sophomore defensive end Dominic Alvis.

"It was a little ankle sprain, but I'm fine," Daniel said.

Meanwhile, Nardo and Morris both expressed disappointment with not being able to play, but both also praised the guys that filled in for them. In Nardo's case, it was junior defensive tackle Steve Bigach, who finished the game with five tackles in what was his first career start.

"They all played well, and Steve did a heck of a job," Nardo said. "He's a great guy and works hard all the time. He went out there and played well."

As for Morris, it was established following practice on Oct. 13 that he wouldn't be able to play after he didn't practice the entire week. As a result, Nielsen moved inside to start the game, and later back to his natural position at outside linebacker.

"I thought he played excellent," Morris said of Nielsen's performance, which included a team-high 12 tackles. "He has been around a while, so he certainly knows the defense. He'll be ready to go no matter what we ask him to do."

Harbaugh v. Schwartz hits home

The post game altercation on Oct. 16 between 49ers head coach Jim Harbaugh and Lions head coach Jim Schwartz has been a heavy topic of conversation across the country. Following San Francisco's 25-19 victory over Detroit, Schwartz confronted Harbaugh as he ran off the field after Harbaugh had slapped Schwartz on the back during their handshake and reportedly said an obscenity.

Right before Ferentz became Iowa's head coach, he was an assistant coach with the Baltimore Ravens. Harbaugh and Schwartz were both with Ferentz in Baltimore during the Ravens' 1998 season. Schwartz was a defensive assistant, while Harbaugh was the team's quarterback.

"I saw it on SportsCenter late Sunday night, laying in bed," Ferentz said. "It was getting a lot of air time this morning coming into work on several stations. I think in our league, that would be Coach Paterno starting a controversy like that.

"Jim Harbaugh is a pretty spontaneous guy, and Jim Schwartz is a pretty reserved guy, so I guess it was a hot-front, cold-front deal. It's given everybody something to think about or talk about this week."

Ferentz isn't the only one in the Iowa program with a connection, however. Linebacker Tom Donatell's father, Ed Donatell, is on Harbaugh's staff in San Francisco as the 49ers' defensive backs coach.

"I saw the highlights of it," Donatell said. "I think Harbaugh was just excited and Schwartz was obviously down about the loss. It's just unfortunate. I'm sure both of them would take it back if they could."

Brett Greenwood Foundation established

The family of former Iowa free safety Brett Greenwood has

established the “Brett Greenwood Foundation” as a way for fans to reach out and help Greenwood, who was hospitalized last month after collapsing during a workout at Pleasant Valley High School.

According to the foundation’s web site, Greenwood developed an abnormal heart rhythm that led to his collapse after his heart stopped and caused “serious neurological injuries.” The family intends to use whatever donations it receives to help support expenses towards Greenwood’s recovery and rehabilitation. It also hopes to contribute funds to the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics and create an endowed scholarship in his name for the school’s athletics department.

For more information on the Brett Greenwood Foundation and how to donate, visit brettgreenwoodfoundation.com.