

10/25/2011: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game at Minnesota with the local media during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Oct. 25, 2011, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Eleven months have passed since the Iowa Hawkeyes left TCF Bank Stadium with an inexplicable 27-24 loss to a Minnesota squad that entered last year's battle for Floyd of Rosedale with a 2-9 record and an interim head coach. The sting from that defeat remains inside the Hayden Fry Football Complex.

The Hawkeyes have a chance to redeem themselves Oct. 29 when they face the Golden Gophers for the first time since their debacle in Minneapolis last Thanksgiving weekend. A win over Minnesota would give Iowa the needed sixth victory to become bowl-eligible.

But much like last year's meeting, the Golden Gophers enter with an abysmal 1-6 record and with a postseason not on their horizon, pride and keeping that bronze pig in Minnesota are all that's at stake for them. As much as the Golden Gophers have stunk this season, senior defensive tackle Mike Daniels expects Minnesota to come with its best shot.

"I wouldn't expect anything different," Daniels said.

That sting resides with the players as they enter the football complex and see their atrium for rivalry trophies sitting completely empty. The spot reserved for Floyd consists of open space that reminds the players of what was unquestionably their worst performance of 2010.

"It's tough because it does symbolize a loss," senior offensive guard Adam Gettis said. "We haven't had three of the trophies, so that symbolizes three losses and that's always bad."

That sting resides with Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz, who didn't recall having any bad practices that week leading up to their trip to Minneapolis, but stood there on the visiting sidelines of TCF Bank Stadium last November watching in disbelief as Minnesota jumped out to a 10-0 lead before Iowa even ran an offensive play from scrimmage.

"When the game started, it clearly looked like we weren't interested in competing," Ferentz said. "They were excited about being there. We weren't."

The pain felt after that loss hasn't been forgotten. While this game isn't necessarily a "must-win" for Iowa, it is the last game for now against an opponent with a losing record. It's also a chance to make last year's outcome a distant memory.

"I know a lot of guys were hurting in the locker room," senior offensive tackle Markus Zusevics said. "We don't want to feel

like that again.”

Awareness of ongoing defensive woes

Ferentz is fully aware of the issues his team has had defensively this season, particularly the issues it has getting off the field.

The most glaring statistic is 58-of-114. This is the conversion rate opponents have had on third downs against Iowa through seven games, ranking dead last in the Big Ten. Also adding to this is the Hawkeyes have also had the ball on average for 27:42, which is also last in the conference.

“We have to do a better job on third down,” Ferentz said. “That’s probably the most obvious thing.”

Here’s what makes the defensive struggles somewhat complex, however. Statistically speaking, Iowa’s red zone defense is the second-best in the Big Ten. While 17 of the 22 scoring drives by opposing offenses in the red zone have been touchdowns, the Hawkeyes have also prevented opposing offenses from scoring any points in the red zone on nine occasions, seven of which have been the result of turnovers.

Senior strong safety Jordan Bernstine said there is a correlation between those red zone numbers and the defense finding a way to tighten up when teams are in fact moving the ball deep into Iowa territory.

“I think it’s just a sense of urgency,” Bernstine said. “We have to keep them out of the end zone. That’s our job as a defense, so that’s what we go and try to do.”

The injury front

Ferentz said his biggest concern right now was with 8-to-10 players he felt were banged up but could be able to play against Minnesota should injuries not recur this week in practice. One such player is junior wide receiver Keenan

Davis, who came out of last weekend's game in the fourth quarter with an ankle injury that he said was a mild sprain.

Davis didn't show any signs of a limp as he entered the football complex Tuesday afternoon.

"This weekend, I had to just stay off of it and I feel good right now," Davis said. "Hopefully practices go well. I'm going to probably take it a little easy on some cuts and everything, but I think I should be O.K. by this weekend."

Other names brought up by Ferentz during his press conference Tuesday included defensive tackle Thomas Nardo and linebackers Tyler Nielsen and Anthony Hitchens.

Another name of note is sophomore linebacker James Morris, who was unable to finish last weekend's game against Indiana because of a high ankle sprain that kept him out of of Iowa's game against Northwestern on Oct. 15.

Morris has been cleared to practice and is planning to stay cautious.

"I reaggravated it a little bit last Saturday, but that's just part of the deal with a high ankle sprain," Morris said. "You work through it, and every day, I'm just trying to improve."

Derby's position change

More was made Tuesday of the position switch made by redshirt freshman A.J. Derby, who converted from quarterback to linebacker last week prior to the Hawkeyes' 45-24 win over Indiana on Oct. 22.

Ferentz said the move was made in large part to the need of depth in the linebacking corps, which has been dealt with injury issues all season dating back to the start of fall camp.

"The propensity we've had for having a need for linebackers

over the last two years, it just seemed like a logical move," Ferentz said. "The nice thing about it is he has still got three years in the program."

Junior tight end Zach Derby said he first learned of his younger brother's position change during a conversation he had with A.J. the morning the move went into effect.

"I just told him to go with whatever his gut said, and he switched over," Zach said. "I think he'll be just fine at linebacker. He has got the skill set to do it. Now it's just a matter of getting the mentality of going in there to hit somebody every play."

Ferentz said the position switch will be permanent for the time being.

A family affair

When Iowa played Michigan State last season, one of the storylines was cornerback Micah Hyde playing against his older brother Marcus, who started at safety last season for Michigan State. This weekend, another Iowa defensive player will have a relative on the opposing sidelines.

But this isn't a battle of brothers. Instead, it's uncle vs. nephew. Felicia Kirksey will be watching her little brother, Iowa sophomore linebacker Christian Kirksey, play against her son, Brandon Kirksey.

Making this storyline even more intriguing is that Christian is more than three years younger than his nephew, who is a senior defensive tackle for the Golden Gophers that has 11 tackles through seven games this season.

"They're just proud of us," Christian said about his entire family's feelings towards him and Brandon. "We're in college. We're playing football, and a lot of people don't do that. It's a family thing."

As for his sister's rooting interests this weekend, Christian understands what she'll be going through.

"I'm her little brother, and that's her son, so I'm sure she'll be rooting for both of us," Christian said.