

11/1/2011: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against No. 13 Michigan with the local media during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2011, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – In the aftermath of a fourth-quarter collapse in Minnesota last weekend, one moment still remains etched in time.

It came with 8:22 remaining and Iowa ahead 21-16. The Golden Gophers had just scored a touchdown, but missed a two-point conversion that would've made it a 3-point contest. Minnesota, at the last possible second, revealed an onside kick attempt as a result of the Hawkeyes not having their hands team on the field.

The Golden Gophers recovered the kick without a single Hawkeye

touching the ball, their offense put together a game-winning touchdown drive, and Iowa left TCF Bank Stadium in defeat, 22-21.

Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz, who initially said following the loss “lack of execution” was why the Hawkeyes weren’t ready for that onside kick, admitted to second-guessing himself in the hours since returning back to Iowa City.

“I’ll take that one,” Ferentz said, referencing where blame should be placed for what happened on that play. “Just as soon as he started making his approach, I almost called timeout. I’m standing next to an official.

“I should have in retrospect, but I didn’t. So that’s the way it goes.”

The player at the center of this game-changing moment was junior running back Jason White, who was nailed by a pair of Golden Gophers as soon as he noticed the ball coming his direction.

“At that point, the ball was high in the air and was kind of over my head,” White said. “There was no 10-yard radius where I can get into a safe zone. I was thinking about recovering the ball, and I was waiting for it to come down. There just wasn’t a lot to do.”

White added that before he and the others on the kickoff return team took the field, they were told by tight ends coach Eric Johnson to be on the look out for anything different being done by their kickoff coverage.

“We were alerted,” White said. “We just weren’t lined up and prepared for it.”

Stopping Denard

The Hawkeyes now find themselves in a position they haven’t been in yet this season – preparing for a ranked opponent.

Iowa plays No. 13 Michigan (7-1, 3-1) on Nov. 5 at Kinnick Stadium, and now has the challenge of stopping perhaps the most dynamic player in the Big Ten, Michigan quarterback Denard Robinson.

While Iowa had some success keeping Robinson in check last year, and even knocked him out of the game with an injury, Ferentz said he notices a more confident Robinson, who is currently fifth in the Big Ten rushing for 103.1 yards per game and has as many rushing touchdowns this season (10) as Iowa sophomore running back Marcus Coker.

Ferentz isn't the only one who believes Robinson has gotten better with experience. Junior cornerback Micah Hyde said Robinson has become a smarter player and stressed the importance of contain against a quarterback of his caliber.

"His athletic ability is tremendous. He can get out there and he can run, and you just got to be able to contain him," Hyde said. "With a lot of the quarterbacks we have played this year, we have done a horrible job of containing them, and this could be the best one of them all."

Robinson's not the only threat in Michigan's backfield, however. Fitz Toussaint has emerged as the Wolverines' No. 1 back after rushing for 170 yards and two touchdowns against Purdue last weekend. With Michigan averaging 245.4 rushing yards per game, which is second in the Big Ten, it's no secret that an emphasis on stopping the run will be in place.

"They got a lot of guys that can hurt you," Ferentz said. "They've got a pretty athletic group."

No immediate changes with defensive scheme

The only change of any sort Ferentz acknowledged Tuesday was the one made last weekend rotating the three starting linebackers around. Senior linebacker Tyler Nielsen made his second start of the season at middle linebacker against

Minnesota, but it was his first start at that spot for reasons other than injuries. Sophomore linebacker James Morris started his first game on the outside and is there now alongside fellow sophomore linebacker Christian Kirksey.

Aside from this, however, Ferentz was adamant that any changes to defensive scheme wouldn't take place this week or anytime soon.

"We're not going to come out with a new front," Ferentz said. "We're not going to one-gap it and play Tampa-2. We're going to play defense, and see what happens."

The bulk of the conversation centered around the defensive line, which didn't have nearly the same amount of rotation taking place against Minnesota that it has the majority of the season.

Size was one matter brought up to senior defensive tackle Mike Daniels, who dismissed the notion that lack of size, particularly at defensive tackle, has played a factor.

"A lot of guys who haven't made it weren't the undersized guys," Daniels said. "Look at Karl Klug. He came in here at 207 [pounds]. I mean, you can't get more undersized than that. When they recruit, they know who they're bringing in, they know who's committed."

Now as for the offense...

After scoring 30-plus points in six of its first seven games, the Iowa offense was only able to muster 21 points against a porous Minnesota defense despite sophomore running back Marcus Coker having a career afternoon with a personal-high 252 yards rushing on 32 carries and two touchdowns.

Even more troubling was the poor performance inside the red zone by an offense that a week ago was the Big Ten's best inside an opposing defense's 20-yard line. The Hawkeyes made

six trips into the red zone and only came away with points on half the occasions. A missed field goal, a sack coming after a timeout that led to another missed field goal, and a lost fumble by quarterback James Vandenberg all came back to haunt Iowa late in the game.

That lost fumble came as a result of Vandenberg being unable to pick up the blitz, which he said was where he needs to make the most improvement this week facing an opportunistic Michigan defense that has forced 20 turnovers this season and has a plus-6 turnover margin that is tied for first in the Big Ten along with Penn State and Wisconsin.

As for how he plans to get better, he said it's a matter of making throws sooner.

"You complete passes for big plays," Vandenberg said. "Obviously, if they're blitzing, there's less people back there. You complete a pass, break a tackle, and there you go. They don't blitz anymore the rest of the game.

"That's something we definitely have to improve on."

The success Michigan has had defensively in 2011 is testament to the job done by first-year defensive coordinator Greg Mattison, who is the father of former Hawkeye defense end Bryan Mattison.

"He has done a great job there," Ferentz said. "That's no surprise. He has done a good job everywhere he has been."

Tying it back to special teams

The onside kick by Minnesota last weekend wasn't the only special teams-related topic discussed Tuesday. When asked in general about his special teams unit, Ferentz said it's the one area he sees improvement being made.

"I think we're gaining ground, quite frankly," Ferentz said. "That's one of the things I'm optimistic about."

One of the more glaring statistics to be documented in the wake of Iowa's loss to Minnesota last weekend is Hyde having just seven punt returns this season for a total of 34 yards, most of which came in the Hawkeyes' 45-17 win over ULM on Sept. 24.

Hyde said he feels comfortable returning punts and that the one thing coaches preach to him before anything else is to field the ball cleanly.

"If we can get yards after the catch, that's good, but if I fair catch it, then it's the offense's ball no matter what," Hyde said.