

11/8/2011: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against No. 13 Michigan State with the local media during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2011, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Three years ago to the day, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz picked up one of his biggest coaching victories, as Iowa upset then-No. 3 Penn State, 24-23. Exactly three years later, the first question to come Ferentz's way during his weekly press conference Tuesday had to do with Joe Paterno, but for much more gruesome reasons.

Ferentz, who idolized Paterno as a kid growing up in Pennsylvania, refused to comment on Paterno and on the ongoing fallout from Penn State as a result of a sex abuse scandal. In fact, Ferentz was very direct in his desire to keep conversation on Iowa's upcoming game Nov. 12 against No. 13

Michigan State.

"I'm just thinking about Michigan State," Ferentz said. "I don't know what anyone can say at this moment."

Ferentz has good reason to keep his focus (and his team's focus) on the Spartans. Michigan State (7-2, 4-1) comes to Kinnick Stadium one game ahead of the Hawkeyes in the Legends Division. The winner of this weekend's game controls its destiny towards playing in the inaugural Big Ten Championship Game on Dec. 3 in Indianapolis.

Iowa enters the contest with a 3-2 Big Ten mark after defeating Michigan last weekend, 24-16. But the records are the last thoughts on the minds of the players.

"We're not worried about the winning the division at all," senior defensive end Broderick Binns said. "We're just worried about getting this next win."

Senior Day

When wide receiver Marvin McNutt was a sophomore two seasons ago, he made perhaps the biggest catch of his Hawkeye career scoring on the final play of Iowa's 15-13 win over Michigan State.

Coincidentally, McNutt will be one of 18 seniors playing their final game inside Kinnick Stadium against, who else, but the Spartans.

"I don't if it's fitting, if it's drama, or whatever," McNutt said. "But it's a funny kind of story. These guys were the first time that people really knew what my name was."

Players like McNutt, Binns and cornerback Shaun Prater have been staples for the Hawkeyes the past few seasons. Then there are those such as senior defensive end Lebron Daniel, who will be starting at defensive end for an injured Dominic Alvis.

"It means a lot," Daniel said about getting to start. "What happened to Dom was tough and unfortunate. He's my teammate, and none of us want anything bad to happen to our teammates."

This senior class also has a chance to accomplish something that hasn't been done at Iowa since 2004 – a perfect season at Kinnick Stadium. All six of the Hawkeyes' wins this season have been at home.

"That would be nice, obviously," Binns said. "But thinking about that right now, with everything else, that would probably just put too much pressure on ourselves as a team."

A family divided, still

When Iowa and Michigan State met last season, one of the storylines was cornerback Micah Hyde facing his older brother Marcus, who was a starting safety for the Spartans.

Marcus might not wear the Michigan State uniform any longer, but that won't prevent him from staying true to his school, even if it comes at his younger brother's expense.

"He just said, of course, that he wants Michigan State to win," Micah said. "That's just how he is."

Micah said Marcus would be in attendance Saturday along with the rest of his family, with his parents no longer torn on who to cheer for.

"It's a good feeling knowing that they'll be able to root for the Hawks this year," Micah said.

A building rivalry

The Hawkeyes and Spartans have played every season since 2007, Mark Dantonio's first as Michigan State's head coach. Iowa has won three of these four meetings. The first meeting in this timespan came at Kinnick Stadium in 2007 when the Hawkeyes overcame a 20-3 deficit to defeat the Spartans in double

overtime, 34-27. Michigan State won 16-13 in 2008 after stuffing a 4th-and-2 run by former Iowa running back Shonn Greene, then Iowa returned the favor in 2009 with the aforementioned McNutt touchdown.

Last season, the Spartans were 8-0 and ranked fifth in the country before the Hawkeyes built up a 30-0 lead and prevailed in a rout, 37-6. The defense, specifically the secondary, forced three interceptions of Michigan State quarterback Kirk Cousins, one of which was lateraled by Tyler Sash to Hyde and ended up resulting in an Iowa touchdown.

Senior cornerback Shaun Prater, who was the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Week following last year's contest, said the game plan that week was simple and that a similar plan would be in place this week given most of the Spartans' offensive personnel remaining the same.

"The whole week, the coaches weren't stressing, they weren't being nervous," Prater said. "They just said, 'Hey, go out there and get the job done.' Everyone felt that pressure to go out there and get the W."

Now with the stakes becoming greater with both teams being in the same division, it's worth wondering whether this series has the ingredients to continue evolving into an ongoing rivalry.

"It has been a nitty, gritty series lately," Hyde said. "At Iowa, we like to think we're the toughest team in the Big Ten. That's how we try to go out and play every weekend."

"I know Michigan State, from talking to my brother, they want to be that team, too. So every year when we come against each other, it's a hard-hitting game. It's a physical game."

More Campbell than Bettis

Dantonio likened sophomore running back Marcus Coker to former

Pittsburgh Steeler back Jerome Bettis during his press conference with Michigan State media Tuesday in East Lansing. Coker was honored by the compliment but didn't think it was accurate.

Coker, who currently leads the Big Ten in rushing, said the two running backs he idolized growing up were Earl Campbell and Walter Payton. Not coincidentally, both Campbell and Payton wore Coker's number, 34.

"My parents were huge football fans," Coker said. "They loved that type of running."

As for the numbers, Coker is not only the conference's top rusher, but ranks fifth in the entire FBS. He has rushed for over 100 yards in each of the last four games while also compiling eight touchdowns in that same span.

"I think every player should try to play to their strengths, and I think he has done a good job of that the last month," Ferentz said.

Injury update

Ferentz said at the start of his press conference sophomore defensive end Dominic Alvis would have surgery on his knee this week to repair a torn ACL he suffered in Iowa's 24-16 win over Michigan last weekend.

He also took accountability for not playing freshman running back Mika'il McCall last weekend like he initially had said he would. McCall was set to play against Michigan but never took the field or had any carries spelling Coker.

"It has nothing to do with Mika'il or anybody else. It's just me," Ferentz said. "I've got to get over it and we've got to go. He's a good player."

Two other names that were brought up towards the end of the press conference were redshirt freshman linebacker Jim Poggi

and sophomore offensive lineman Nolan MacMillan. Poggi was dressed last weekend and Ferentz said he had been practicing for a few weeks now. As for MacMillan, Ferentz hinted at him not returning anytime during the final three weeks of the regular season.