

11/22/2011: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game at No. 22 Nebraska during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Nov. 22, 2011 at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa — After 17-and-a-half months of build-up, the week many in both the states of Iowa and Nebraska have long been anticipating has arrived.

On Nov. 25, the Iowa Hawkeyes (7-4, 4-3) and No. 22 Nebraska Cornhuskers (8-3, 4-3) will square off at Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Neb., for what's being dubbed by the schools as the inaugural "Heroes Game." Neither team remains in contention for the Legends Division crown, which was won by Michigan State last weekend, but that isn't diminishing the significance of this being the first meeting between these two schools since Nebraska first accepted an invitation to join the Big Ten in June 2010.

This game was originally set to take place Nov. 26, but the announcement to move the game up to the Friday after Thanksgiving came last March and was a decision that Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz was supportive of.

“After our experience last year, I was kind of at the conclusion of, why not?” Ferentz said. “It’s a good thing for us. We’re excited to get invited to the party.”

With this game being on a Friday however comes a short week of preparation, something Iowa hasn’t had as a program since the end of the 1966 season. In fact, the last time the Hawkeyes played a regular season game on a day of the week that wasn’t Saturday was the 1987 Kickoff Classic against Tennessee, which was played on a Sunday.

“We won’t have any excuses on Friday,” Ferentz said. “If we don’t play well, it won’t be because of this week. I think we’re in good shape there, and I think our players are in good mental spirit.”

But while the extra day of preparation isn’t there, one of the things to counter that is this being Thanksgiving break at the UI, meaning players don’t have classes and school work to deal with in addition to preparing for a game.

“It’s a big opportunity,” senior linebacker Tyler Nielsen said. “We don’t care if we cut a day off. It’s going to be fun to be able to play and then sit back the next day and watch some of the other games.”

Growing up Husker fans

Two starters on the defensive side of the ball have roots to Nebraska and grew up fans of the Cornhuskers.

Sophomore free safety Tanner Miller has two relatives – his father Brian and his uncle Kevin – who played for Tom Osborne at Nebraska. His father was a linebacker for the Cornhuskers,

while his uncle played along the defensive line. Miller spent part of his childhood living in the state, and said he went to about 3-4 games a season on average as a kid.

Miller said it was a childhood dream of his to play for Nebraska prior to moving to Iowa in eighth grade, which is when he said his affection for the Iowa program first began.

"I never thought growing up that I would ever be coming out of the visitors' locker room if I was ever going to get a chance to play there," Miller said. "At first, it will be a little different, but I'll have time to take it in. After that, it's all business."

Meanwhile, senior cornerback Shaun Prater will be heading home, sort of. Prater hails from Omaha, and had the luxury of his final high school game being played inside Nebraska's Memorial Stadium.

"I just want to make sure we get this win," Prater said. "I have 30-something family members that's going to be there, so I want to make sure we have a chance to win."

"I have all these memories of growing up watching these guys play, going to the stadium. Hopefully I can definitely get this win."

Two that could've been Huskers

It's not only players with roots to Nebraska who have stories this week, but those who were also being recruited by Nebraska. Two such players were senior defensive end Broderick Binns and junior quarterback James Vandenberg.

Binns said Nebraska pursued him after he had already committed to Iowa, and it was basically a "Thanks, but no thanks" situation.

"They were going to offer me my junior year and they asked me to come out on a visit," Binns said. "I was already committed

here, so I was like, 'No, guys. I don't want to waste your time and my time.'"

The odds of Binns playing for the Cornhuskers may have been slim, but the same can't be said about Vandenberg. Nebraska was the first major school to offer Vandenberg a scholarship and while he didn't commit to then-head coach Bill Callahan, he did have serious interest in playing there up until Callahan was fired and replaced by current head coach Bo Pelini.

This was also around the same time, Vandenberg said, that Iowa came in and finally gave him the offer he was waiting for.

"Coach Osborne contacted me and just made sure that I knew my scholarship still stood, but Coach Pelini never contacted me," Vandenberg said. "I was really fortunate to have a chance to pick between the two of them, and I'm glad I chose here."

Reflecting back

While this week's game against Nebraska marks the first time the Hawkeyes and Cornhuskers will meet as Big Ten rivals, this won't be the first time these teams have met in the Kirk Ferentz era.

In fact, Ferentz's first game as head coach at Iowa came in 1999, when Nebraska left Kinnick Stadium with a 42-7 win over the Hawkeyes.

"Nebraska took it to us pretty good," said junior center James Ferentz, who was 10 years old when his father made his Iowa head coaching debut. "We hung in there for about a quarter. I might have to look at the tape. They had a good squad, and obviously we were on the rebound there."

The two teams met at Memorial Stadium the following season, with the Cornhuskers, who were ranked No. 1 in the country that afternoon, prevailing 42-13.

"We weren't very good then, either, and they were pretty good," Kirk said. "That wasn't much fun. Hopefully we've closed the gap a little bit. We'll see. Time will tell."

Depth depleted at RB

Iowa will be without the services of two freshman running backs when it travels to Nebraska on Friday. Jordan Canzeri will miss his second straight game due to a hamstring injury that prevented him from traveling to West Lafayette, Ind., last weekend for the Hawkeyes' game against Purdue.

Meanwhile, Mika'il McCall, who returned from his ankle injury and had two carries against the Boilermakers, has been suspended by Ferentz for violating a team policy. Ferentz said McCall was instructed to go home this week and wouldn't be practicing with the team. No timetable has been set for when McCall will return, but Ferentz said what McCall did to get suspended took place after the team returned from Purdue.

For now, senior running back Jason White is the No. 2 behind sophomore Marcus Coker, while redshirt freshman De'Andre Johnson would be third in the order.

Daniels receives additional sack

Senior defensive tackle Mike Daniels had perhaps his best game of the 2011 season last weekend against Purdue. It turned out to be even better than originally documented.

Daniels was credited Tuesday with a sack in the game that originally belonged to sophomore cornerback B.J. Lowery, so Daniels' final numbers were nine tackles, five of which were for a loss of yards, and three sacks.

"Something I've been focusing on is just increasing my energy level and performance week-by-week," Daniels said. "It's nice to see that it's actually starting to show."