

2011 Insight Bowl Media Day notebook



The Insight Bowl trophy and dueling Iowa (left) and Oklahoma helmets are on display during the bowl's annual Media Day held on Wednesday in Scottsdale, Ariz.

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SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. – In the final days leading up to the 2011 Insight Bowl, the Iowa Hawkeyes and No. 19 Oklahoma Sooners appear to be two teams going in different directions.

For Iowa, this is its second consecutive trip to the desert to play in this bowl after defeating Missouri in last year's game. The Hawkeyes enter with a 7-5 record as they did in 2010, and the future has some uncertainty with two coaching positions becoming vacant at week's end.

In addition, the Hawkeyes have also found themselves having to deal with the absence of sophomore running back Marcus Coker, who was suspended last week for being in violation of the UI's Student-Athlete Code of Conduct.

Among the names being thrown out as guys that might step in for Coker are a trio of freshmen running backs – true freshmen Jordan Canzeri and Damon Bullock, and redshirt freshman De'Andre Johnson.

“They do a great job catching the ball out of the backfield, which is something that’s big for us, and it’s just a great change of pace,” junior quarterback James Vandenberg said. “They can do the job. It’s a great opportunity for them. We expect their best.”

Meanwhile, the Sooners find themselves in this game after a loss to in-state foe Oklahoma State cost them a second straight Big 12 crown and capped off a 9-3 campaign that began with Oklahoma ranked as the preseason No. 1 team in the country. In addition to all that, the Sooners have also been dealing with season-ending injuries to numerous players including running back Dominique Whaley and wide receiver Ryan Broyles, both of whom led the team in rushing and receiving, respectively.

The embarrassment of losing 44-10 to the Cowboys earlier this month appears to have worn off a team that at the very least was saying all the right things Wednesday.

“We still want to finish strong,” Oklahoma senior defensive end Frank Alexander said. “We try to keep a positive attitude about it and just keep pushing to win this last game.”

Rogers’ return

When Iowa defeated Missouri in last year’s Insight Bowl, it did so without the services of fullback Brad Rogers. In the days leading up to that match-up, doctors discovered a heart condition Rogers had that would prevent him from playing, and it ended up keeping him from participating in most football-related activities until this past fall.

Rogers had a chance to reflect back on being held out of last

year's contest, and described it as bittersweet upon hearing the Hawkeyes would be returning to the same place where both his playing career and his life changed forever.

"Coming back to a place where something that happened, that I didn't know what was going on, it was different," Rogers said. "But as I got here, I kind of like it."

Rogers' first game back came in October when the Hawkeyes lost to Penn State. He said doctors continue to check on him regularly and that barring any setbacks, his football career is as close to normal as it was prior to the heart condition being found.

"Now that I know what happened or what was going on, I kind of had that reassurance that I was going to play this year," Rogers said.

The "Bell-Dozer"

The publicity surrounding Oklahoma quarterback Landry Jones has been well-deserved. But he's not the only Sooner signal-caller the Hawkeyes will have to deal with in the Insight Bowl.

Redshirt freshman quarterback Blake Bell has been used in goal-line and short-yardage situations by Oklahoma this season and actually leads the Sooners with 10 rushing touchdowns this season.

"That's just our way of having fun," senior offensive tackle Donald Stephenson said. "We kind of keep it simple as far as offense, and when we can change it up and bring Blake Bell in, he's a great physical specimen. We bring him in, try some different stuff, and it works out."

"He brings a lot of excitement and that extra little oomph on our offense."

In light of his success, the nickname "Bell-dozer" became

popular among the rest of the team. In fact, sophomore offensive guard Gabe Ikard said it has reached the point where he only calls him "Dozer."

"I've shortened 'Bell-dozer' to 'Dozer,' and literally, I don't think I've called him Blake in like a month," Ikard said. "Every time, he'll just smile like, 'Really? Really?'"

Prater, McNutt reflect

Cornerback Shaun Prater and wide receiver Marvin McNutt both made the decisions last winter to return for their senior seasons. On Wednesday, both shared no regrets in the decisions they made.

Prater believes his draft stock has gone up from where it was at this time last December.

"As far as looking back on this season, really I can't take back anything minus those losses," Prater said.

As for McNutt, there was more to the decision than simply coming back to break just about every receiving record at Iowa. The St. Louis native was the first member of his family to graduate college, a feat McNutt is as proud of.

"It's an honor to say I've done that, as well as be a part of this Hawkeye history for one more year, to play with the players I played with," McNutt said. "You're going to take this experience with you for the rest of your life."

Reiff, Jones undecided

Both teams have players that will face similar decisions to that of what Prater and McNutt had to make last year. On Iowa's end, the talk is surrounding junior offensive tackle Riley Reiff, who has been widely projected as a possible first-round pick in 2012.

Reiff said Wednesday he did submit paperwork to the NFL for a

draft evaluation and plans to make a decision before the Jan. 15 deadline given to college juniors to decide about leaping for the pros or staying in school.

"I'll sit down and think about it, and we'll see where it goes from there," Reiff said, adding that what he is told by NFL evaluators will factor greatly into the decision he ends up making.

Meanwhile, Oklahoma has Jones, a preseason Heisman favorite that has thrown for over 4,000 yards this season. Jones said he remains unclear of what he wants to eventually do.

"I've gone back and forth so many times on this. One day I'm leaving, one day I'm staying," Jones said. "I think once this season's done, I'll be able to get a bigger grasp on what I want to do."

Playing for Stoops

Iowa's mantra will be playing for defensive coordinator Norm Parker, who will retire following the Insight Bowl. As for Oklahoma, Sooners players haven't shied away from how much they want to win this game for head coach Bob Stoops, who was a four-year starter at defensive back for Iowa and was a member of the 1981 squad that went to the school's first Rose Bowl in 23 years.

"He doesn't want to lose to Iowa," Ikard said. "I'm sure he has got several of his buddies emailing him, texting him. I'm sure it would be a little sweeter since it's Iowa, but I'm not sure how much he's thinking about that."

Last year, the Sooners were in Arizona for the Fiesta Bowl around the same time Iowa played Missouri in the Insight Bowl. In fact, Stoops attended last year's Insight Bowl to root on the Hawkeyes and even wore an Iowa sweatshirt to show his support.

Senior linebacker Travis Lewis was also on hand, and to say he gave Stoops a hard time with the Iowa shirt might be a bit of an understatement.

"I was getting on him the whole time. The whole time," Lewis said. "There was nothing that I was holding back. I let him know that he was a traitor and everything like that. But he takes it all in stride and has a good time with it."

Resemblance game

One word was used by Oklahoma players on both sides of the ball to describe what stood out to them about Iowa – physicality.

Two teams the Sooners faced in 2011 were mentioned as teams that paralleled the Hawkeyes. When it comes to the Iowa offense, the comparison was made to that of Kansas State, a team that was undefeated before losing to Oklahoma back on Oct. 29.

"They're going to check into the right play almost every single time," Lewis said. "They see a blitz coming from the left, they're going to check a run play to the right. It kind of reminds you a lot of Kansas State."

While the offense drew comparisons to Kansas State, the Iowa defense was mentioned in the same breath as that of Florida State's defense. The Sooners defeated the Seminoles in Tallahassee, Fla., on Sept. 17, back when both teams were ranked in the top 10.

"Florida State was probably the most physical defensive line we played," Ikard said. "Iowa, the way they just play right down the middle of you, it's definitely different than pretty much anyone we've faced. They play a similar defense structurally, but the style they play and defensive line is something we really haven't faced this year."

“It will be an interesting contrast of styles when it comes to both sides of the ball, so it should be pretty intriguing to watch.”

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