

3/20/2012: Iowa spring football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the start of spring practices with the local media during a press conference held Tuesday, March 20, 2012, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – On multiple occasions Tuesday, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz drew parallels between where the Iowa Hawkeyes are as they begin spring practices Wednesday and where they were at this time four years ago.

One coincidence between 2008 and now is coaching transition. Prior to the revamping of the coaching staff last month, the most recent coaching changes made at Iowa came after the 2007 season when wide receivers coach Erik Campbell was brought on board from Michigan and Lester Erb switched from coaching receivers to coaching running backs following Carl Jackson's retirement.

The other notable coincidence between the two seasons is youth. Not necessarily at the same positions, but in general.

“It was where we were developmentally as a team,” Ferentz said about the parallels. “We had a young team that year that went through some changes. At that time, [Pat] Angerer and [Ricky] Stanzi were second team players all spring and in September and ended up emerging.

“We could see those stories.”

One area where youth is quite noticeable is with the defensive line. The spring 2-deep released Tuesday featured four redshirt freshmen along the defensive line, with three of those four being listed first-string.

Darian Cooper was listed at defensive tackle alongside senior Steve Bigach, while the two defensive end spots were occupied by Dean Tsopanides and Riley McMin.

“Now it’s a chance for them to learn what we’re doing in our scheme, putting some things to use,” Ferentz said.

On the offensive side of the ball, the group of running backs listed have small bits of experience from last season, but all three backs – Jordan Canzeri, Damon Bullock and De’Andre Johnson – are sophomores. Canzeri looks to be the early favorite to start after he led the Hawkeyes with 58 yards rushing on 22 carries against Oklahoma in the Insight Bowl.

Injury update

A pair of defensive linemen – junior Dominic Alvis and sophomore Carl Davis – are both unlikely to participate in spring practices due to knee injuries. Alvis’ injury occurred during the Hawkeyes’ 24-16 win over Michigan back on Nov. 5, while Ferentz said Davis had his knee injury addressed last January and would likely be ready in time for summer workouts.

Meanwhile, there are a handful of players that either are

returning or might be returning from season-ending injuries that took place last year. Ferentz gave an optimistic report on junior linebacker Shane DiBona, who tore his Achilles tendon last August during fall camp, saying he was back working out in January and was close to full speed.

One other significant injury of note from last year was that of junior offensive lineman Nolan MacMillan, who had a sports hernia injury that sidelined him for the entire 2011 season. Ferentz said he's keeping his fingers crossed on how much MacMillan will be able to participate this spring, but he was listed on the spring 2-deep issued Tuesday as the back-up to junior Brett Van Sloten at right tackle. Prior to the injury, MacMillan had seen action at the guard positions as a redshirt freshman in 2010.

"He just had one of those years where nothing went right for him," Ferentz said. "But he has had a good out-of-season. I think he's really encouraged right now. I think we saw two years ago he's really capable of being a good football player if he can stay healthy.

"I think he's on the right path right now."

Offensive changes

A heavy topic of discussion Tuesday was with regards to what types of changes could be taking place offensively during spring ball with first-year offensive coordinator Greg Davis in charge of the play-calling.

Ferentz made mention of how the two managed to "streamline" on various issues and that he feels comfortable with the path the Hawkeyes will attempt to take as an offense moving forward.

"There's a lot of new nomenclature, terminology and we're all learning right now," Ferentz said. "Even the old dogs are trying to learn some new tricks."

Ferentz made hint of not wanting to be two-back 100 percent of the time offensively and expressed how Davis had managed to use multiple types of personnel packages while working at Texas, from two-RB and two-TE sets to 3-4 WR sets.

The route Iowa ultimately goes remains to be seen. But like Davis, Ferentz stressed an importance of using packages that best fit the personnel already in place.

One possibility might be throwing the ball more given how senior quarterback James Vandenberg threw for over 3,000 yards in his first full season as a starter last year. But with that comes greater expectations placed on both the receiving and tight end corps.

“Bottom line, we’re going to throw it. We’re not going to turn it over. We’ve got to be smart about what we’re doing,” Ferentz said. “It’s not all just the quarterback. It’s protection. It’s guys doing the right things with routes, not tipping the ball up in the air and making catches. We have to get better at making catches.”

Very little set with special teams

Right now, the only certainty with special teams is that senior cornerback Micah Hyde will be the Hawkeyes’ top punt returner. Everything else remains unsettled.

That includes kicking duties. Ferentz said junior kicker Mike Meyer would start spring practices as the No. 1 kicker, but that senior Trent Mossbrucker and redshirt freshman Marshall Koehn would both have opportunities over the next five-and-a-half months to dethrone Meyer.

“We’ll take that probably right through the summer,” Ferentz said. “Mike comes in as the No. 1 guy, but we’ll let them compete.”

Meanwhile, senior John Wienke and junior Jonny Mullings will

compete this spring at punter. However, a third punter will be added to the competition once incoming freshman Connor Kornbrath arrives on campus.

Finally, there's kickoff return. Ferentz mentioned four players who all had experience returning kickoffs last season – Canzeri, Bullock and wide receivers Keenan Davis and Kevonte Martin-Manley – that would be in the mix during spring practices, but that this could change in the fall once the incoming 2012 class gets added into the equation.