

8/28/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' season opener at Soldier Field against Northern Illinois during his weekly press conference held on Tuesday, Aug. 28, 2012 at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City. Ferentz enters his 14th season as Iowa's head coach.

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Kirk Ferentz has made no secret this year about his team's youth, stating on numerous occasions – which includes his first weekly press conference of the season Tuesday – how the 2012 version of the Iowa Hawkeyes is the youngest team he has ever coached.

Perhaps where this point proves most evident is in the first two-deep released by the team back on Aug. 24. Having been known in the past for rarely (if ever) including true freshmen on that two-deep prior to Iowa's first game, the depth chart

sent out over the weekend included four true freshmen, including two running backs – Greg Garmon and walk-on Michael Malloy.

Sophomore running back Damon Bullock is the most likely to start against the Huskies this weekend given how he actually has game experience in contrast to both Garmon and Malloy. But Ferentz made clear all three would get their chances.

“I have a plan to play all three guys and see how they do,” Ferentz said. “I don’t know to what extent. We’ll see how that plays out.”

In addition to the duo of backs, cornerback Kevin Buford and punter Connor Kornbrath also made appearances on the two-deep, with Kornbrath being awarded the starting spot at punter for Iowa’s season opener Sept. 1 against Northern Illinois.

Ferentz said Buford had left an impression on the coaching staff from the get-go and described him as a “very positive young guy” that has “great attitude.” As for Kornbrath, he finds himself starting after beating out senior John Wienke and junior Jonny Mullings for the punting duties.

“Basically, we chart those guys like we chart everyone else,” Ferentz said. “Right now, we just feel like he gives us our best chance.”

Playing in Chicago

This weekend’s contest between Iowa and Northern Illinois will mark the second time they’ve played each other at Soldier Field, which is home to the NFL’s Chicago Bears. Coincidentally, the previous match-up came on Sept. 1, 2007, which will be five years ago to the very date on Saturday.

For players like junior tight end C.J. Fiedorowicz, a native of Johnsburg, Ill., it’s an opportunity that he can’t help but feel excited about.

"I've been there several times watching the Bears," Fiedorowicz said. "To actually be able to play in there, it's a once-in-a-lifetime thing and I'm going to embrace it."

While these two teams are familiar with playing each other in the Windy City, this is still somewhat of a rarity for the Hawkeyes under Ferentz. In the 14 seasons he has been head coach, this is only the third time Iowa has opened any season away from Kinnick Stadium – one instance being the last Northern Illinois game in 2007, the other occurrence being in 2000 when the Hawkeyes played Kansas State at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Mo. Interestingly, those are also the last two times Iowa hasn't appeared in a bowl game of any sort.

Northern Illinois enters this contest with the nation's longest winning streak of 11 straight games. The Huskies won the Mid-American Conference last season, as well as the GoDaddy.com Bowl over Arkansas State. With this being the first time anyone on the current squad has opened a season away from Iowa City, the learning experience is one that could potentially prove valuable over the long haul.

"There have been past games where we come in and they're games we should win, possibly win by a lot of points. This game is going to be a tough game," senior cornerback Micah Hyde said. "In the Big Ten, every week is like that."

"Coach [Ferentz] said the other day, 'You can't come out, make a lot of mistakes and still win the game.' This isn't one of those games. They're going to be a tough opponent. They're coached well and they're very athletic."

Soldier Field playing surface

When some think of Soldier Field, they'll think of the Chicago Bears and all of their history and tradition. Others might think of how the exterior of the stadium resembles a spaceship since its renovations were completed in 2003.

Then there's the playing surface. In this case, it's not because Saturday's game is one of only three the Hawkeyes are scheduled to play on grass, but rather the reputation Soldier Field has developed as having the worst playing surface in the entire NFL.

"I've heard that from about everybody for the past week," senior quarterback James Vandenberg said.

Ferentz acknowledged not being impressed by Soldier Field's playing surface back in 2007, calling it "hard." He said the Hawkeyes would hold two practices this week – one of which was Tuesday afternoon – on the outdoor grass field behind the new indoor facility, which features the same FieldTurf surface used at Kinnick Stadium. It marks the first time the outdoor field – which is also new – will be used for practices, primarily because of the summer heat.

"Hopefully, the field this year won't be as hard as it was five years ago," Ferentz said. "If it still is, we'll still play."

From the players' perspective, it isn't so much playing on grass as opposed to FieldTurf, but rather being able to find the right kind of cleats to wear on game day. Hyde said he was recently cautioned about Soldier Field's surface by former safety Jordan Bernstine, who played in the Washington Redskins' preseason game against the Bears there on Aug. 18.

"You just got to get your cleats right and go out before the game starts, get your footing right and just know that you got to have your feet underneath your hips," Hyde said.

Iowa has played seven games on grass surfaces over the past two seasons, posting a 2-5 record – the two wins came last season at Purdue and in the 2010 Insight Bowl against Missouri. In 2009, the Hawkeyes played four games on grass and were victorious on all four occasions.

Use of multiple tight ends, rotation along D-line

When observing Saturday's game, there will be two things to keep an eye on throughout the afternoon. One being the usage of tight ends, which Ferentz has said is the strongest group on this year's team. The other is how rotations work along the defensive line, which he said was the most inexperienced.

By now, everyone knows what Fiedorowicz is capable of in Greg Davis' new offense, especially after the heap of praise bestowed upon him during the spring. Senior tight end Zach Derby has also proven as somewhat of a known commodity as well.

Then there are two other tight ends Ferentz said will see playing time against the Huskies – sophomore tight end Ray Hamilton and redshirt freshman Jake Duzey.

"They're both very detailed guys," Fiedorowicz said. "Ray's a big guy. He can block, he can catch the ball. [Tight Ends coach David Raih] has done a really good job coaching. Jake has got great hands. He has got the size. They both have got the size.

"At any time, I think any of us can play."

As for the defensive line, it's a group Ferentz said he has been pleased with in terms of progress made, but also one that could feature a rotation of anywhere between 6-8 players.

"I'm not sure we have somebody that can go out there and play 70, 75, 80 snaps right now," Ferentz said. "It's going to be a week-by-week process."

One of those surely to be included in the rotation is redshirt freshman defensive tackle Darian Cooper. He said Tuesday he isn't sure exactly how many snaps he'll end up playing, but knows it'll be dictated largely by how he and the others all perform in practice this week.

"They're going to put out whoever they believe is the best for that situation," Cooper said when asked about how a possible rotation might be determined.

Nothing settled at strong safety yet

One position that remains up in the air is strong safety, as senior Tom Donatell and sophomore Nico Law continue to share reps with the first-team defense in practice and compete against each other to see who starts out there this weekend.

"We'll see how it goes," Ferentz said. "We're comfortable with either guy. I think whoever ends up getting the start, both will probably play some and they'll both play on special teams."

If it does wind up being Donatell, it makes for an intriguing story. Donatell was originally a walk-on and came to Iowa as a quarterback. He eventually found a role in the secondary, but was asked last season to move up to linebacker due to injuries plaguing the Hawkeyes at the position.

Donatell returns to being a defensive back, a spot he said is more "natural" for him. But he also said the knowledge he gained playing linebacker in 2011 has helped him immensely since making the switch back.

"Knowing the whole defense really helps on run fits and knowing where your help is, knowing your leverage and knowing where other guys need to be, getting other guys in position," Donatell said. "Playing linebacker helped me learn a lot of the defensive line stuff and the passing game. Just how everything works together has been really beneficial to me."

As for Law, he said the biggest improvement he has noticed from the start of fall camp up to now has come with his technique.

"Coverage, tackling, just everything," Law said. "I've been

more mentally focused.”

Team captains announced

As Hyde took questions from the media Tuesday afternoon at the new Kenyon Practice Facility, he was informed about being named one of Iowa’s four team captains for this weekend’s game. The news left him pleasantly surprised.

“Wow,” Hyde said. “It’s an honor. I’ve been trying to do a good job of leading this whole summer. It’s a great honor.”

In addition to Hyde, Ferentz announced at the start of his press conference that the trio of Jameses – Ferentz, Morris and Vandenberg – would also be team captains. This marks the second consecutive season Vandenberg has been voted a captain by the team.