

9/4/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming home opener against in-state rival Iowa State during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Sept. 4, 2012, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Sept. 10, 2011. That afternoon at Jack Trice Stadium in Ames, the Iowa State Cyclones pulled off an improbable 44-41 win over the Iowa Hawkeyes in triple overtime and reclaimed the Cy-Hawk Trophy in the process.

For Iowa, that defeat began a season of trophy futility. Losing to Iowa State was followed by watching Floyd of Rosedale stay in Minneapolis another year, the Heroes Game Trophy take residence in Lincoln, Neb., and the 2011 Insight Bowl Trophy winding up in the possession of the Oklahoma Sooners.

As the team began preparations for this year's meeting with Iowa State that's taking place Sept. 8 at Kinnick Stadium, it's clearly evident that last season's loss to the Cyclones still stings. So much so that the players have been given an almost-daily visual reminder around the Hayden Fry Football Complex of the team's empty trophy atrium.

The pain of that loss hasn't left players like senior cornerback Greg Castillo, who was benched immediately afterwards in favor of Micah Hyde moving from free safety back to corner and Tanner Miller being the team's starting free safety.

"Two touchdowns I gave up and we lost the game, too. That was one of the main reasons why," Castillo said.

Coming off a near disaster against Northern Illinois in Chicago last weekend, the Hawkeyes now get their shot at redemption against Iowa State, who enters with an identical 1-0 record after beating Tulsa in its opener, 38-23. Between last year's game and how both teams have begun their 2012 seasons, this week's game has a bit of a different vibe from past Iowa-Iowa State encounters.

In past meetings (including even last year's game that Iowa lost), the Hawkeyes appeared to enter as a distinct favorite. While Iowa is slightly favored entering this weekend's showdown, it's as close to a toss-up as it has been in quite some time.

"Both teams are playing well right now and it's going to go right down to the wire," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said.

Attempting to avoid a "Steele" trap

Ferentz called it a "highlight reel" performance.

In what was only his second career start, Iowa State quarterback Steele Jantz lit the Hawkeye defense up in last

season's meeting, completing 25-of-37 passes for four touchdowns and not throwing a single interception. But it wasn't just what Jantz did through the air, but that he also ran for 42 yards and picked up first downs at opportune times for the Cyclones in the process.

Iowa surrendered 194 yards on the ground in last year's meeting, with a lot of those rushing yards coming on the outside.

"Somebody always has containment," Ferentz said. "It's part of defense and if it breaks down, you really run the risk of being in trouble. We found out the hard way last year."

Iowa State's ground game features a pair of running backs who also had big games that afternoon – Shontrelle Johnson and James White. Johnson rushed for 108 yards, while White scored two touchdowns on the ground, one of which being the game-winner in the third overtime.

But make no mistake. Jantz is the one who has the attention of everyone in Iowa City this week, especially after a performance where he was 32-of-45 passing for 281 yards and accumulated three touchdowns – two passing, one rushing.

"Last year, he could make a really good play and then the next play, turn it over," Hyde said. "I think this year, he has learned from his experiences in the last year and he's more of a consistent player. He's playing well and he's leading his team pretty well."

Unsung heroes prove key in opening win

There are definitely a fair share of reasons why the Hawkeyes find themselves sitting at 1-0 enter this week's game as opposed to 0-1 for the first time in a dozen years.

Two of those reasons were seniors like Castillo and punter John Wienke, both of whom simply waited for their

opportunities and made the most of them when they arrived.

Castillo has started four games in his career, but since his benching after last year's Iowa State loss has mainly been used in instances where Iowa uses nickel and dime packages. Against Northern Illinois, he had to fill in for an injured B.J. Lowery and wound up playing perhaps the best game of his Hawkeye career.

"You always got to be ready. You never know," Castillo said, mentioning Iowa's "Next Man In" mantra under Ferentz. "During the week, I was studying, making sure I was ready just in case something happened."

Last weekend's game showcased Castillo's progress at corner. It also featured him making the biggest play of the entire afternoon, downing a punt at the Northern Illinois 1-yard line late in the fourth quarter.

That punt came courtesy of Wienke, who lost out on the starting job in favor of true freshman Connor Kornbrath, but was the guy Ferentz wanted punting in that particular situation.

"It was something we had been practicing and Coach Ferentz asked it of me, along with Coach [Lester] Erb and a lot of the other coaches," Wienke said. "I knew I had to be prepared and I had been practicing it a lot. So when the situation came, I just had to be prepared."

What ensued after that play by both Wienke and Castillo was a 3-and-out from the defense that set up Iowa having excellent field position for what proved to be the Hawkeyes' game-winning drive on offense.

"That was huge," junior linebacker Anthony Hitchens said. "Everyone wants to go out there and make plays on special teams. That was a great punt by John and a great punt by Greg."

“Our defense really needed that and they made a big play when we needed to.”

Meyer maturing, growing confident

Iowa junior Mike Meyer probably couldn't have asked for a better start to 2012. He nailed 4-of-5 field goals, including a crucial 50-yard kick in the fourth quarter prompting the Hawkeye comeback and on Monday was rewarded by being named co-Big Ten Special Teams Player of the Week. Meyer also had three kickoffs result in touchbacks after only recording four touchbacks on 66 kickoffs all of last season.

But it wasn't just the numbers Meyer posted in the one-point Iowa win that have impressed Ferentz. Rather, it's the process Meyer took to reach the point where he could become as dependable as he proved to be last weekend.

Last year in a 22-21 loss to Minnesota, Meyer missed a chip-shot field-goal attempt and found himself in a funk the rest of the season, finishing just 14-of-20 on field goal attempts. In the offseason, Meyer said he became a more consistent kicker during both spring practices and fall camp. What made him more confident was what was being said by coaches and teammates who took notice.

“I think when everybody started to show they had confidence in me, I started to have more confidence in myself to perform to the best of my abilities,” Meyer said. “The preparation and practice has been really good. I think that's where I, and most other kickers, get their confidence. Just through doing everything right every day.”

That confidence was on full display last weekend after missing a 28-yard field goal attempt against the Huskies. Instead of letting that missed kick mess with his psyche, Meyer managed to regroup himself and make three more field goals, including that clutch 50-yard kick.

“He’s a much more mature player than he was a year ago or two years ago,” Ferentz said. “He has really prepared well and he has worked hard and he has gotten better each and every segment, if you will.”

Festive weekend ahead in Iowa City

Saturday’s game between the Hawkeyes and Cyclones is a culmination of what will be a busy weekend around Iowa City.

With this being Iowa’s home opener, a pair of annual events make their return for the fourth straight year – Hawkapalooza on Sept. 6 and FryFest on Sept. 7. Hawkapalooza is an event organized by the Iowa Hawk’s Nest (student organization) at Hubbard Park that features a pep rally promoting various Hawkeye sports including football, as well as a free concert headlined by T-Pain this year.

As for FryFest, this will be held once again at the Coralville Marriott Hotel and Conference Center. This year’s event centers on the rivalry between Iowa and Iowa State that has been played annually every year since 1977 when the series resumed on the gridiron. Former players from both schools will be on hand to sign autographs for fans and take part in a one-hour discussion panel chronicling the rivalry since its inception.

In addition to all of this, the Hawkeyes will also be wearing throwback uniforms Saturday honoring the 1921-22 squads that won consecutive Big Ten championships. The jerseys are black with shades of old gold featured on both sides. Iowa will also wear old gold helmets reminiscent of what was worn in 2004 against Kent State, as well as old gold pants.