

9/11/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Northern Iowa during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2012 at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Two games into the 2012 season and the Iowa Hawkeyes have only managed to score one touchdown and a total of 24 points.

Those two figures – one touchdown and 24 points – have proven tough for head coach Kirk Ferentz to swallow, especially after a 9-6 loss to Iowa State last weekend where the offense was anemic. The poor showings offensively have led to some outside the program having concerns about the passing game, and perhaps more specifically, senior quarterback James Vandenberg.

In two games, Vandenberg has completed 41 of 75 pass attempts

and tossed for 365 yards. The Keokuk native made it through Iowa's opener against Northern Illinois without turning the ball over, but wound up throwing two interceptions against Iowa State – one right before halftime and the other on what he acknowledged was an ill-advised throw that ultimately sealed the Hawkeyes' fate last weekend.

"There's nothing to say," Vandenberg said. "I mean, all 70,000 people are going to have their opinions. That was the wrong play. The interception was the wrong play, we got to execute better in the red zone, all of that's true."

Ferentz reiterated his belief in Vandenberg, saying how he thought the quarterback was the most invested player of anyone on the entire team during the offseason as Iowa was learning a new offensive system.

"If I have a worry about him, I worry about him putting too much pressure on himself," Ferentz said. "It's easy to tell a guy, 'Don't. Just play your position.' Easier said than done. But that's the way he's built. He's so respected because of that.

"He's extremely tough mentally and tough physically and he's an excellent football player."

As for the rest of the team, they continue to view him as their leader, knowing that he's not the only reason for the issues Iowa has had on offense. The evidence in their faith comes in the form of Vandenberg remaining one of the Hawkeyes' team captains for this season.

"I think he sets a great example for the younger guys to look up to," said senior center James Ferentz, who is also one of Iowa's four captains. "When things don't go your way, you're going to look to your leaders and see how they respond and how they act. Starting on Sunday, I think James has done a great job of being the leader on this team and showing the younger guys that the sun does rise and now we need to put that behind

us and move forward.”

Drops dooming the offense in defeat

While no one has placed more blame on themselves for last weekend’s loss than Vandenberg, the receiving corps feels accountability as well after dropping eight passes thrown by their QB.

Three drops in the fourth quarter proved to be the most costly. In the first minute of the quarter, Iowa faced 3rd-and-Goal and Vandenberg rolled out. He threw it in the end zone to sophomore fullback Mark Weisman, who was covered, but had his hands on the football and wasn’t able to haul it in. Instead of the Hawkeyes tying the game at the very least (a made extra point would’ve put Iowa up 10-9), they had to settle for a short field goal from junior kicker Mike Meyer.

“I could’ve made the play and it’s a play I expect to make,” Weisman said. “It just didn’t happen on that play.”

Then following a Cyclone turnover that led to Iowa having the ball near midfield, the Hawkeyes went 3-and-out after a pass on third down was dropped by junior tight end C.J. Fiedorowicz, and then turned the ball over on downs when junior wide receiver Don Shumpert dropped a Vandenberg pass.

“It was a critical point in the game and it was a good ball,” Fiedorowicz said about the third-down pass he wound up dropping. “It’s a play you want to make. When that happens, it’s frustrating.”

Sophomore wideout Kevonte Martin-Manley said when the receiving group got together Sunday to watch film, receivers coach Erik Campbell was able to pinpoint specifically what led to all the drops coming from them and the other skill players.

“He points out why you dropped it, whether you took your eyes off the ball, whether your hands weren’t close together and if

you dropped it when you're not supposed to, things like that," Martin-Manley said. "Ninety-nine percent of the time if you drop a ball, there's a reason why from a coaching standpoint, so we look at things like that.

"Taking your eyes off the ball, that's probably the biggest thing – trying to run before you catch it."

Hitchens emerging as key defensive player

If there's one encouraging sign for the Hawkeyes from their loss to Iowa State, it was the play of their linebacking corps. The junior trio of James Morris, Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens combined for 40 of Iowa's tackles. Morris also made two big plays on a pair of second half Cyclone turnovers – recovering a fumble in the third quarter and intercepting a pass in the end zone and returning it up near midfield in the fourth quarter.

Morris had the performance Kirk Ferentz called "phenomenal." But Hitchens had the stat line raising plenty of eyebrows, recording 19 of those 40 tackles between the three linebackers. In fact, his 27 tackles two games into the 2012 season currently leads the Big Ten.

Hitchens might be the least experienced of the three linebackers, making just his second career start while both Morris and Kirksey have full seasons as starters under their belts. But Ferentz has been pleased with the progress Hitchens has made, especially in adjusting to becoming a player that excels when all he has to do is "read and react."

"Coach believes that if you see it and you believe it, then you go," Hitchens said. "When you're hesitant and you're shuffling, you're thinking about what you're supposed to do instead of just doing it, it's harder on yourself."

What makes Hitchens' transformation into a key ingredient in Iowa's defense was how he became a linebacker in the first

place. He originally was brought in as a running back, only to switch sides and work as a safety. It wasn't long after that he would be moved again to playing at linebacker.

Senior cornerback Micah Hyde recalled hosting Hitchens on his recruiting visit, a time when safety was going to most likely be his position if he played defense.

"I remember looking at him like, 'Wow, dude. You're pretty big. What position are you going to play?' And he was like, 'Strong safety,'" Hyde said. "So then I was just thinking in the back of my head, 'They're going to put 30 pounds on you. You don't even know it. You're going to be huge here soon.'

"He's definitely put on some weight, but it's the best for him because he can move now. He's at linebacker and added some weight, but he can also run from sideline to sideline."

Preparing for UNI

Now the Hawkeyes turn their attention to their second of four straight home games, playing Northern Iowa on Sept. 15 at 2:30 p.m. Central. The Panthers enter this contest with an expected 1-1 record with the loss being in their season opener at Wisconsin and the victory coming this past weekend against Division-II Central State.

But it's the loss at Wisconsin that had both Ferentz and his players talking on Tuesday. Trailing 26-7 in the fourth quarter, UNI scored a pair of touchdowns to get within 26-21 and had a chance in the final minutes to win the game, only for the Badger defense to force a fourth-down stop that secured a Wisconsin win.

The player who impressed Ferentz the most on film was UNI redshirt freshman quarterback Sawyer Kollmorgen, who won the starting job as the Panthers' signal-caller during their fall camp. Kollmorgen has thrown six touchdown passes to zero interceptions, but the two touchdown tosses in the fourth

quarter of that game at Camp Randall Stadium is what caught Ferentz's attention the most.

"That's a tough place to go under any circumstance," Ferentz said. "For a first-year player to go up there and play the way he did, particularly in the second half, that says a lot about him. He's a very impressive young guy."

Defensively in that same game, the Panthers managed to keep Wisconsin running back Montee Ball in check. While Ball rushed for 120 yards on 32 carries, he only scored one touchdown after a season where he tied a record set by Barry Sanders of 39 touchdowns in 2011.

"They just play good fundamental defense," said sophomore running back Damon Bullock, who only had 53 yards rushing himself against Iowa State after rushing for 150 yards in the 18-17 win over Northern Illinois on Sept. 1. "You know, Wisconsin couldn't really push it as much as they wanted to, but they had a couple of mishaps and if they had executed on what they're supposed to, they might have had more."

Reliving a near disaster

Perhaps getting as much attention as the Panthers' near-upset of Wisconsin at Camp Randall Stadium two weeks ago is what happened the last time Iowa and UNI met back in 2009. The Hawkeyes needed a pair of blocked field goals in the final seven seconds by then-defensive end Broderick Binns and then-linebacker Jeremiha Hunter to preserve a 17-16 win over the Panthers. It didn't appear this way at the time, but in hindsight, it proved to be the start of a memorable season for Iowa as it went 11-2 and won the Orange Bowl.

While none of the current seniors were integral parts of the Hawkeyes' game plan that afternoon, they did manage to pull away some memories from that particular contest. For Hyde and wide receiver Keenan Davis – who were both true freshmen at the time – it was their first game as Hawkeyes.

"I was talking with my mom after the game and I was like, 'Wow. Why did I come here?'" Hyde said. "That was the craziest thing I had ever been a part of in my entire life.

"My freshman year when I came in, I thought it was just one of those games where you should roll over a team, one of them 42-0s. They're here to compete. They see a Big Ten team on their schedule and they're ready to play."

Then there are those like defensive lineman Steve Bigach, who was a redshirt freshman in 2009. He said while he hasn't thought too often about winning that game, he did say more of a memory of that afternoon has developed for him through time.

"I just remember going wild after we blocked the field goal that second time," Bigach said. "It's crazy. In the first couple of years here, you're almost moving so fast that your head's kind of spinning a little bit and you don't tend to remember all that much. But when you get older, things kind of slow down for you. You do remember the positive things.

"They came in and fought real hard. We're expecting them to do the same this year."

Ferentz said Tuesday would be the first time he'd make reference to that '09 thriller as a way of reminding his team how it shouldn't take UNI lightly. What he wasn't sure of yet was how often he'd bring it up.

"If we ignore that, then we're fools," Ferentz said.