

9/18/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Central Michigan during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Sept. 18, 2012, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – While football is considered by those who have either played or coached to be “the ultimate team game,” it’s the stories of specific individuals that have resonated lately around the Iowa Hawkeyes.

In their 27-16 win over Northern Iowa last weekend, the Hawkeyes’ storyline was sophomore fullback Mark Weisman. A year after transferring from Air Force, Weisman earned the opportunity to start as Iowa’s fullback. Against Northern Iowa, he was asked to do even more.

As the Hawkeyes watched both of their available running backs – sophomore Damon Bullock and true freshman Greg Garmon –

leave the game with injuries, it was Weisman having to fill the void. After starting the game with a pair of one-yard touchdown runs while lining up at fullback, Weisman went off on the Panthers to the tune of 113 yards rushing on 24 carries and recorded an additional two-yard touchdown run as a running back.

It wasn't just what he was doing, but how he was doing it, that proved evident to his teammates as they got a chance to watch the film on Sunday.

"You could tell he really wanted the ball and he was running hard," senior wide receiver Keenan Davis said. "When you see that kind of guy working hard, it rubs off on you. You want to do more for that guy. You want to be that last block to get him into the end zone."

Weisman will make the start at running back when the Hawkeyes play their final non-conference game of the season at 11 a.m. Central on Saturday against Central Michigan (1-1). Ferentz said he wasn't optimistic of Bullock being back this week after the running back left the game with a head injury (Ferentz didn't say specifically whether Bullock suffered a concussion or just has concussion-like symptoms). Meanwhile, Garmon hasn't been completely ruled out after injuring his right arm, but whether or not he returns to action this week will be determined by what he is or isn't able to do in practice.

Weisman knows he'll be the feature back this week, but plans on preparing the same way he has all season – with the mindset that he could be heavily depended on at anytime, like last weekend.

"The coaches always have these stories about people coming in, stepping in and knowing their job and everyone is really dependent on them," Weisman said. "You really have to, every week, even if you're not the starter."

Nicknamed "The Juggernaut" by his teammates, Weisman has managed to stay incognito on campus despite the amount of publicity since last weekend's game. While he's not an attention-seeker off the field, he continues to make his presence felt on it.

"I think the best way to describe Mark is he's your typical Iowa football player," senior center James Ferentz said. "I think he's a great reflection of this program. He just wants to contribute any way possible.

"He's quick to pass the success to other guys, but Saturday, he did that all out on his own. He deserves all the credit. He's just a great example of what it means to be an Iowa Hawkeye."

Donatell showing consistency

While the overall play has been inconsistent at times, the Iowa defense has shown consistency in a few areas – some good and some bad.

One of the noticeably bad traits has been getting off to sluggish starts, allowing both Iowa State and Northern Iowa to score touchdowns on their opening drives in each of the past two games. But making up for that has been the ability to adjust on the fly, as those are the only two touchdowns Iowa has given up in the last two weeks.

As far as individuals go, one player who has emerged has been senior strong safety Tom Donatell after recording interceptions in each of Iowa's last two games against the Cyclones and Panthers. The consistency he brings to the field is ultimately what won Kirk Ferentz over in deciding to have him start in the secondary.

"He's the perfect Iowa safety," Ferentz said. "He just shows up every day, works, and I think the plays that he has made is a result of him practicing and watching tape, just playing

smart football. I'm not saying he's like a lot of the safeties that we've played, but a lot of the safeties that we have had that have played well have had those attributes."

Players such as senior cornerback Micah Hyde and junior linebacker Christian Kirksey observe the progress Donatell has made and aren't surprised by it in the least. Both of them said his knowledge of the entire defense since he has playing experience at both safety and linebacker have made the entire defense feel comfortable around him, not only because he knows his role, but everyone else's as well.

"You can see it throughout practice. He always brings a high energy," Kirksey said. "Just to see him go out there and make plays like he's doing right now, it makes us as a defense feel great that we have a good safety back there."

Cotton getting his chance

Injuries to Bullock and Garmon are the roots to the Weisman story. But Garmon's arm injury, along with some concerns with Iowa's passing game thus far, have led to another player who has patiently waited his turn and might now be showing his progress in games.

Junior wide receiver Jordan Cotton had a reputation as a player who worked hard in the offseason, having drawn praise in the past from both Ferentz and wide receivers coach Erik Campbell. Last weekend against Northern Iowa, Cotton found himself being used not just as a receiver when Iowa went to three-receiver packages, but also on kickoff return after Garmon left the game with his injury in the second quarter.

Cotton hauled in one catch, an eight-yard completion in the fourth quarter from Vandenberg. That one catch came on a 3rd-and-4 and helped move the chains on a clock-chewing possession where Iowa marched all the way to the Panther 1-yard line and took more than seven minutes off the clock.

"That behind the shoulder, flipping his hips, it's a difficult catch to make and he has been making it all of camp," Davis said. "When you're making that catch during practice, it's easier in the game and he proved it.

"Now everybody has more confidence in him."

Time will only tell if Cotton is to ultimately emerge as a reliable third-option at receiver alongside Davis and sophomore Kevonte Martin-Manley. But between being able to make plays last weekend and his teammates gaining that confidence in him, Cotton could be someone worth keeping an eye on going forward.

"He's just being consistent right now and just taking care of his business, handling all the small things," Martin-Manley said. "He has talent. He has the ability and the potential to do big things."

Fiedorowicz becoming detail-oriented

Sometimes a player's impact on a game goes beyond the box score. This is probably the best way to summarize the season junior tight end C.J. Fiedorowicz has had to this point.

Prior to the season starting, there was speculation of Fiedorowicz being the biggest beneficiary of Greg Davis coming in as offensive coordinator. Given his frame and what coaches had said about him during the offseason, there's justification in why some felt this way about him.

Through three games, Fiedorowicz is third on the team in both receptions (10) and receiving yards (109). While those numbers might not jump off the charts, Ferentz insists those numbers are more representative of opposing defenses game-planning for Fiedorowicz as opposed to him having any struggles.

"The ball goes where it has to go based on how they play us. But when we call him, we really need him," Ferentz said. "He

has done some good things and I'm really optimistic he'll have a good year this year."

One aspect of Fiedorowicz's game Ferentz said he noticed was better against Northern Iowa was his attention to smaller details such as not leaving his feet once he touches the ball.

"He talked to me yesterday about staying on my feet," Fiedorowicz said. "Like Mark [Weisman], he's a big guy and most DBs don't really want to tackle him. So lowering my shoulder is probably more of an advantage than me trying to jump over someone. It's just paying attention to the details and knowing what I'm supposed to do."