

9/25/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Minnesota during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Sept. 25, 2012, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Frustration. Disappointment. Anger. Any of these words would adequately describe the mood of this Iowa football program as it opens Big Ten play Sept. 29 with its Homecoming game against Minnesota.

As the Hawkeyes shift their attention towards reclaiming Floyd of Rosedale for the first time in three seasons, it was painfully obvious the challenge of coming off a loss like the 32-31 defeat Iowa endured to Central Michigan last weekend has been more of a challenge than normal. After taking a 31-23 lead with just over two minutes left, the Chippewas scored nine unanswered points to pull off the come-from-behind stunner.

"It definitely took more than a day for me. I'm not sure about anybody else," junior linebacker Anthony Hitchens said.

The Hawkeyes' most recent defeat has led to a wide array of criticism from fans, some of which has been directed at players but for the most part has been aimed at head coach Kirk Ferentz. The players who have gotten criticism know it's out there and attempt efforts at ignoring it completely.

Then there's the criticism aimed at their coach, which is something senior center James Ferentz has grown accustomed to seeing whenever losses have mounted.

"We've kind of seen it all through these 13 years," James said, referring to how many full seasons his father has been the head coach. "We've been in the highs and we've been in the lows. Right now, we're living week-to-week and our goal right now is to beat Minnesota."

Similar angst has been on display before and to Iowa's credit, there have been recent instances where it has been able to overcome head-scratching losses one week and win a critical game the following week as it will need to do here. The most recent example would be last season where the Hawkeyes' followed up a stinker against Minnesota by beating then-No. 13 Michigan at home the very next week.

"You have to get on your feet," Kirk Ferentz said. "Somehow, some way, you have to learn from what happened and sometimes in real life, there aren't things to learn. It's just life. But in football, there's certainly things to learn and we had a lot to discuss on Sunday. But once that's over, you got to move on."

The onside kick and how it all broke down

For all the personal foul penalties, failed third-down attempts and other Hawkeye blunders that probably played a bigger role in losing to Central Michigan, the one play

getting the most discussion Tuesday was the onside kick recovered by the Chippewas inside of a minute left showing on the clock.

Ferentz made the following comment in his postgame press conference: *"Typically, some guys are assigned to go block the guys that are pursuing and other guys are assigned to catch. We looked very confused out there and that's not a good thing. Very indecisive."*

On Tuesday, he elaborated a bit more on how he goes about putting together blockers and receivers for his hands team. He said the front line consists of "blockers," which would primarily feature tight ends and linebackers that could block but also have the ability to put their hands on the ball if need be. He added that one defensive lineman – redshirt freshman Darian Cooper – has been used and was used last weekend as one of the blockers.

The rest of the hands team, the "receivers," would mainly consist of wideouts, defensive backs and anyone else with ball skills.

Ferentz then said there's "gray area" with whether the blockers should be allowed to touch the football if it comes their way. In this particular instance, there were players lined up who moved away from the ball with the mindset of one of the "return" players on the hands team being able to run up and get the recovery.

"The coaches coach, 'If the ball's coming, screaming at them, let it go and let the guys in the back handle it,' because obviously it will slow down by then. But if it's able to be filled, like it's a slow dribbler, then take it. It's their call," senior wide receiver Keenan Davis said. "It was just unfortunate we didn't get it."

Speaking of onside kicks...

It only seems appropriate that onside kicks were such a heavy topic Tuesday. In winning each of its past two meetings with the Hawkeyes during both the 2010 and 2011 seasons, Minnesota on both occasions caught Iowa off guard attempting onside kicks that the Golden Gophers would recover and turn into touchdowns.

Two years ago, it came in the first quarter after Minnesota took a 3-0 on its opening drive. The Golden Gophers recovered the onside kick attempt and got a touchdown run from quarterback MarQueis Gray to make it 10-0 before the Hawkeye offense even ran a play from scrimmage.

Then came last year's game, which was also played at TCF Bank Stadium in Minneapolis. In a sort of similar fashion to what occurred against Central Michigan last weekend, Minnesota trailed 21-10 in the fourth quarter and after scoring a touchdown to make it a five-point game (it missed the 2-point conversion try), the Golden Gophers recovered an onside kick no one on Iowa was prepared for and Gray once again scored what proved to be the game-winning touchdown for Minnesota.

It should be noted that both Gopher onside kicks were designed to catch Iowa off guard as opposed to the Chippewa onside kick last weekend that came at a juncture where Central Michigan had to onside kick the ball in order to have any shot of winning.

"You definitely have got to see the ball off the tee," senior cornerback Micah Hyde said. "I think you see that a lot in college football now, even in the pros. You see that front line wants to get back and block and then they just tap it 10 yards and everybody runs to get it. You definitely have to have that in the back of your mind."

Davis said the Hawkeyes usually spend their Thursday practice preparing for onside kick situations and that an even bigger emphasis would be placed on it them this week given

Minnesota's recent history of using them.

"We're definitely going to be ready for that," Davis said. "[The coaches] are going to preach that and every year, we have."

There's the onside kicks, and then there's coming off two straight losses to a team that, at least on paper, was inferior on both occasions. James Ferentz offered up the following explanation for the Hawkeyes' recent woes with their border rival:

"If you go back and look at the past two years, Minnesota has been the more excited team to play," James said. "They come out, they're hitting harder. Offensively, they're executing crisper than we were."

"They've been the more excited team, and again, that falls on us as players. We need to change the mentality around here and we need to come out Saturday and be the more excited team."

Closer look at Minnesota

If there is a bit of good news for the Hawkeyes, it's that Gray, the guy who accounted for both of those touchdowns following onside kicks the past two seasons, won't be able to play for Minnesota this week as he continues to recover from an injury suffered in the Golden Gophers' 28-23 win over Western Michigan on Sept. 15.

Enter Max Shortell. The sophomore made his third career start at quarterback for Minnesota last weekend in its 17-10 victory over Syracuse and is getting the nod again versus Iowa. Against the Orange, he completed 16-of-30 passes and had 231 yards through the air.

Unlike Gray, who is known to be more of a dual threat that can break to the outside like he did on his winning touchdown run against Iowa last year, Shortell is more in the mold of the

pocket passing-type of quarterback the Hawkeyes have faced in recent weeks. Even with the different dynamic Minnesota presents behind center, Iowa's plan defensively isn't too different than it would be if Gray was playing.

"They're obviously going to come out and try to run the ball first like they always do, so we've got to stop the run first and foremost," senior defensive end Joe Gaglione said. "Then they do a lot of play-action, so we're just going to be able to get a good rush and then go from there."

But perhaps the bigger story with Minnesota entering this contest is its turnaround defensively. Last season, the Golden Gophers had one of the worst defenses in the entire Big Ten. In fact, they beat the Hawkeyes last October despite surrendering 252 yards on the ground to then-Iowa running back Marcus Coker, who has since transferred to Stony Brook.

This season, Minnesota's defense has been an instrumental part of its 4-0 start. Its seven interceptions and plus-5 turnover margin both lead the Big Ten alongside Ohio State. The Golden Gophers also possess defensive lineman D.L. Wilhite, who comes in leading the conference with 4.5 sacks.

"He's a hard-nosed football player," sophomore left tackle Brandon Scherff said of Wilhite. "We've just got to block him and go take care of business."

First ever September bout with Gophers

Prior to last season's October meeting in Minneapolis, the Iowa-Minnesota rivalry had been played annually during the month of November from 1984-2010. Saturday's game at Kinnick Stadium marks the first time ever the Hawkeyes and Golden Gophers have ever played each other during the month of September.

This is also Iowa's first Homecoming game against Minnesota since 1979, which was Hayden Fry's first season as the

Hawkeyes' head coach.