

10/23/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game at Northwestern with the local media during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Oct. 23, 2012, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz called it “a thorough beating.” Senior defensive tackle Steve Bigach and others all used the term “embarrassed” to describe their moods following it.

“It” refers to the Hawkeyes’ 38-14 loss to Penn State last weekend at Kinnick Stadium. And make no mistake, “it” was as ugly a loss as Iowa has endured in the 14 seasons Ferentz has been at the helm.

“There wasn’t much that went well,” Ferentz said. “I’m sure we’ve had worse beatings, but I’d have to go back to ’04 to

remember a game like that.”

Everything that could go wrong for the Hawkeyes did go wrong. Offensively, the running game was stuffed and the passing game was practically non-existent. Defensively, Iowa was carved apart by a balanced Nittany Lion attack that accumulated over 500 yards of total offense.

Even junior kicker Mike Meyer, who entered the game having made 14-of-15 field goals on the year, missed a pair of kicks that the entire team became accustomed to him making.

“We practiced so hard throughout the week and we didn’t show up like we wanted to,” junior linebacker Anthony Hitchens said.

Junior free safety Tanner Miller said from watching the film, what stood out to him was the number of mental errors committed over the course of the game.

“We didn’t come out ready to play and you just got to be prepared for it this week and come out with a little more fire,” Miller said.

Vandenberg criticism

Part of the fallout from Iowa’s loss last weekend has surrounded the quarterback position. Ferentz made the decision to stick with his starters – and more specifically senior quarterback James Vandenberg – for the duration of the game despite Penn State possessing a 31-0 lead in the third quarter.

If Vandenberg had been taken out of the game at any point, the next man in would have been redshirt freshman quarterback Jake Rudock, who has been second behind Vandenberg on the 2-deep all season.

“I guess you could make an argument that it would give the next player experience,” Ferentz said. “But at that time, I

felt like the best thing to do was keep our offense out there and let them play.”

Vandenberg finished the game 17-of-36 passing for 189 yards. He threw a late-game touchdown pass to senior wide receiver Keenan Davis, but also completed a pair of passes to the Penn State defense, as well as lost a fumble deep inside Iowa territory that led to a Nittany Lion score late in the second quarter.

His performance added to a season of struggles, as the Keokuk native has thrown only three touchdown passes to five interceptions through seven games. It also resulted in some booing from the Kinnick Stadium faithful, something Vandenberg said was the least of his worries.

“As long as I’m given the opportunity to play here at this university, to play quarterback, I’m going to do everything in my power to get us points and to move us down the field,” Vandenberg said. “As soon as [the coaches] tell me to come out or to get moved, obviously that would be a different situation.

“But as long as they want me in there, the boos, the criticism, none of that stuff really bothers me.”

On Tuesday, junior tight end C.J. Fiedorowicz was quick to come to Vandenberg’s defense, saying the blame for Iowa’s lack of offensive productivity against Penn State shouldn’t be placed squarely on the signal-caller’s shoulders.

“Fans don’t see everything that goes into preparation,” Fiedorowicz said. “All they see is where the ball goes. They don’t see how he’s being rushed in the pocket. He’s under a lot of pressure and if you’re getting hit, that’s not something where the quarterback, as they’re throwing the ball, wants to really be doing.

“It’s not his fault. We had two offensive linemen go down,

Mark [Weisman] wasn't able to play. The whole offense really hadn't been working together."

Scherff and Donnal out, MacMillan and Blythe in

As if being "thoroughly beat" by Penn State wasn't bad enough for the Hawkeyes last weekend, they also saw their offensive line get decimated with injuries. In a span of three plays during the first quarter, Iowa saw sophomore left tackle Brandon Scherff carted off and sophomore right guard Andrew Donnal head to the locker room on crutches.

Ferentz confirmed the worst-case scenario Tuesday, saying both Scherff and Donnal would miss the rest of the 2012 season. Ferentz said Scherff suffered a broken bone, while Donnal suffered a knee injury.

In their places are a pair of linemen that have familiarity with game experience. Redshirt freshman Austin Blythe returns to right guard after an ankle injury in Iowa's 32-31 loss to Central Michigan was what prompted Donnal to see the field in the first place. Blythe said the time he spent on the sidelines while recovering from his injury put things into perspective for him.

"Nothing's for sure," Blythe said. "You've just got to play every play with the intensity that needs to be brought in order to succeed."

Meanwhile, Scherff was replaced at left tackle by junior Nolan MacMillan, who saw his first game action in over two years last weekend.

While MacMillan didn't have game experience playing the tackle position, he did start games at guard for Iowa in 2010. Last year, a sports hernia injury sidelined MacMillan for the entire 2011 season. Prior to the start of this season, he suffered a hand injury and went through most of fall camp playing with a club.

"I think a lot more confident in the offensive scheme and in what I'm doing," MacMillan said when comparing himself now to 2010 before injuries began to plague him. "I think I'm more physically mature."

Both Blythe and Fiedorowicz described MacMillan as "tough" and "intimidating." Junior defensive end Dominic Alvis was once roommates with MacMillan and got a first-hand glimpse of the time and energy MacMillan had spent to return to the gridiron.

"Nolan is a strong guy and he has a strong work ethic," Alvis said. "I knew he was going to do well recovering from it. I had no worries about him."

Preparing for Colter, Mark

The Hawkeyes now play three of their next four games away from Kinnick Stadium, starting this week with a trip to Evanston, Ill., to take on a 6-2 Northwestern squad. Iowa won last year's meeting 41-31, but prior to that had lost five of six against the Wildcats. Northwestern won the most recent meeting at Ryan Field 21-17 back in 2010, a game where the Hawkeyes squandered a 10-point fourth-quarter lead.

As far as Northwestern was concerned, the bulk of the talk at the football complex on Tuesday surrounded its two biggest playmakers on offense – running back Venric Mark and quarterback Kain Colter.

Mark currently leads the Big Ten in all-purpose yards and not only is a home-run threat on the ground for the Wildcats, but also in the return game.

"He's an amazing player," said senior cornerback Micah Hyde, who handles the punt return duties himself for Iowa. "He's dangerous when he gets the ball in his hands and he's one of the quickest guys in the Big Ten."

"He can break any given run at any time. We've got to prepare

our best and try to contain him.”

Meanwhile, Colter is a player Iowa got a little bit of taste for playing last season at Kinnick Stadium, but he has since become more of a focal point in Northwestern’s offense. Not only does he play the quarterback spot, but there will be numerous occasions throughout Saturday’s game where Colter will line up in the slot and either run or catch the football (a la Kordell Stewart back in the mid-1990s with Colorado and later, the Pittsburgh Steelers).

Last season against the Hawkeyes, both Colter and Northwestern’s other quarterback Trevor Siemian tossed fourth-quarter touchdown passes. Colter was 2-of-4 for 44 yards passing and also had a team-high 76 yards rushing and six catches for 71 yards receiving.

“You just got to not let him become a spark,” junior linebacker Christian Kirksey said. “They do move him at quarterback and receiver, so you just got to stay in tune and just treat him at the position he’s playing.”

Homecoming for Weisman

This weekend’s game happens to be Northwestern’s Homecoming contest. It’s also a homecoming of sorts for one prominent Hawkeye player. Sophomore running back Mark Weisman was raised in Buffalo Grove, Ill., approximately 19 miles Northwest of Ryan Field.

“It will be fun to play at home,” Weisman said. “A lot of people will be coming to the game. It should be cool.”

While the Hawkeyes are already somewhat familiar with the Chicagoland area having played at Soldier Field already this season, Weisman’s role on the team has also changed dramatically. He said he’s anticipating a greater turnout of family and friends this weekend not only because of proximity to his hometown, but also due to the fact he’s now playing

running back as opposed to starting at fullback in that season opener against Northern Illinois.

"We still take the same preparation no matter what, but it will be fun out there," Weisman said. "I'll definitely have some fun."

Gift from Cotton

Perhaps the only positive stemming from Iowa's loss to Penn State was junior wide receiver Jordan Cotton's touchdown via a 92-yard kickoff return that prevented the Hawkeyes from being shut out.

As it turns out, Cotton's score did more than just put Iowa on the scoreboard.

Jordan's father, Marshall Cotton, was celebrating his birthday last Saturday when the Hawkeyes played Penn State. Jordan said there was only one thing his father wanted for his birthday – for Jordan to score a touchdown. Even though Iowa trailed 38-0 when the touchdown occurred, Jordan was excited to at least be able to fulfill that request.

"He was happy for me," Jordan Cotton said. "He would've been more happy if we had gotten the 'W,' but he was still happy."