

10/30/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses his team's upcoming game at Indiana during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Oct. 30, 2012, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – When the Iowa Hawkeyes travel to Bloomington, Ind., this weekend to face the Indiana Hoosiers, there could potentially be a ton at stake.

Sitting at 4-4 after losses each of the last two weeks, Iowa needs to win two of its remaining four games to become bowl-eligible for the 12th straight season (Iowa missed a bowl game in 2007 despite being 6-6). With the Big Ten having a pair of teams – No. 6 Ohio State and Penn State – both barred from postseason play altogether this year, reaching the six-win plateau would virtually guarantee the Hawkeyes receiving an invite to a Big Ten-affiliated bowl game.

But considering that Iowa still has yet to play the two teams currently tied atop the Legends Division – Michigan and No. 21 Nebraska – Saturday's game against Indiana could ultimately be the difference between a bowl trip and sitting at home for the holidays come December.

"I don't think anyone's hanging their heads. I didn't detect that Sunday," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said, referencing the last time he met with his team following its 28-17 loss to Northwestern this past weekend. "What we need to do is just worry about where we're at this week."

While the Hawkeyes are reeling from consecutive losses to Penn State and Northwestern, the Hoosiers have been a team trending upward. They enter Saturday's game with a 3-5 record, but four of those losses have come by a combined total of 10 points. Not only that, but Indiana snapped an 11-game losing streak in Big Ten play last weekend as it defeated Illinois, 31-17, for Kevin Wilson's first conference win as its head coach.

"Indiana is not a pushover team and I hope they don't think that we are," senior wide receiver Keenan Davis said. "It's going to be a competitive game."

Bracing for "the hit"

Sophomore running back Damon Bullock knew it would come eventually. Seeing his first game action in six weeks following a concussion suffered in the third game of the season against Northern Iowa, Bullock knew as he got more carries against Northwestern that at some point, a big hit would be laid on him and how he responded to it would prove significant.

"I didn't really take a good hit in practice all week, so I was anxious to actually get hit and see how I'd react to it," Bullock said.

Just getting to this point proved more challenging than

anticipated. Bullock was medically cleared prior to Iowa's game against Michigan State back on Oct. 13. However, he found himself having a setback during the week and ended up not making the trip to East Lansing.

He finally made it back last weekend, catching a pass in the first quarter from senior quarterback James Vandenberg on one of his first plays from scrimmage. Bullock would continue to get some reps at running back while the starter, sophomore Mark Weisman, was riding a stationery bike on the sideline. Weisman re-entered the game, but after one play, had to come back out permanently, giving Bullock his opportunity to be the feature back.

The hit he awaited came in the second half. In fact, he got hit in the head. Bullock was down briefly, but managed to get back to his feet and finish the game.

"I slammed my head, closed my eyes and I woke back up and was ready to go," Bullock said.

As it turns out, the timing couldn't have worked out better for Iowa getting Bullock back. Ferentz said Tuesday it is unlikely Weisman will be able to play against Indiana due to the injury he suffered last weekend, meaning Bullock will get the start this Saturday against a Hoosier defense that surrenders a league-high 222.5 yards per game on the ground.

"As the game went on, he got stronger," senior center James Ferentz said. "We're really lucky to have a back like him back."

Getting the O-line resituated

With season-ending injuries to both Brandon Scherff and Andrew Donnal, the offensive line had some reconfiguring done prior to playing Northwestern.

Junior Nolan MacMillan filled in for Scherff at left tackle

and was originally listed on Iowa's 2-deep last week as the starting left tackle. As it turned out, he not only didn't start at left tackle against the Wildcats, but he didn't even start, period. As of Monday, MacMillan was listed as a second-string player at three different positions along the line.

The guy who did get the start at left tackle was Matt Tobin, who had started every game this season prior to last weekend at left guard. Although it was different seeing him play on the outside, Tobin said he had gained plenty of experienced lined up as a tackle in practice over the years.

"That was the only place I practiced," Tobin said, reflecting back on prior seasons before playing more frequently at guard. "Then they moved me inside and I played a little bit. I was just stationed there at the beginning of the year and then Scherff got hurt, so I moved out.

While Tobin switched one spot over, his old spot of left guard was initially filled by redshirt freshman Jordan Walsh, who ended up rotating in and out with MacMillan at that spot. Austin Blythe, another redshirt freshman playing at guard, described Walsh as someone who acts shy off the field but exudes confidence on it.

"He's probably one of the best guys at finishing [plays], especially at practice," Blythe said. "Just being able to put guys on the ground on a consistent basis, I mean, we all do it. But he's just one of the better guys at it in practice and that's just something he has got in his attitude."

Kirk Ferentz said Walsh played "like a young player" at times, but graded out O.K. in his eyes after re-watching the film. He said the same about Blythe, who made his first start back at right guard since suffering an ankle injury against Central Michigan.

"Hopefully with all three guys that are playing guard right now, I think we'll see them play a little faster this week

just because of the experience factor,” Ferentz said.

High-octane Hoosier offense

Once again, Iowa finds itself facing a team that has become an offensive juggernaut this season in Indiana.

Last season, the Hoosiers were rebuilding from scratch under head coach Kevin Wilson. Indiana showed its potential from time-to-time, but only managed to win one game. Not only that, but there was also turmoil surrounding the program both inside and out.

At this time last year, Wilson had lost his top prize in recruiting when in-state quarterback Gunner Kiel – the younger brother of then-Indiana quarterback Dusty Kiel – de-committed from Indiana, only to commit to LSU first, then ultimately end up at Notre Dame. When the Hoosiers played the Hawkeyes last October, it was Tre’ Roberson taking the snaps.

Roberson won the starting job at the beginning of this season, only to suffer a season-ending injury in Indiana’s second game of the year against Massachusetts. Since that time, the Hoosiers have been rotating between Cameron Coffman and Nate Sudfeld at quarterback, with Coffman starting every game, but Sudfeld coming in a la a relief pitcher in baseball.

“Both these guys will run the football,” Ferentz said. “I think the difference [in contrast to Northwestern] is if they’re on the move, they’re looking to throw the ball and then they’ll pull it down and go.

“They do have some cold runs, but their intent if they break the pocket is more to throw the football, where last week, it was a little different story.”

As an offense, the Hoosiers are one of the most prolific in the Big Ten this season. The Hoosiers average 443.4 yards per game in total offense, which is second in the conference to

Nebraska. Indiana has scored at least 24 points in every contest this season and leads the Big Ten in red zone offense, converting 34 of its 36 trips inside the opponent's 20-yard line into points.

Senior defensive tackle Steve Bigach is among those fully aware of how potent Indiana is offensively, but he said hearing things such as "this game could become a track meet" isn't something that phases him or anyone else on the defensive side of the ball.

"Going against a good opponent, a team that can score a lot of points, as a defense you take that personally," Bigach said. "It's our job to go out and stop them, but that all comes from within."

"We just need to go out and perform."