

11/13/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game at No. 23 Michigan during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Nov. 13, 2012 at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Four straight losses.

Before this past weekend, the last time Iowa had lost four straight games under Kirk Ferentz was back in 2000, his second season at the Hawkeye helm. But following a 27-24 loss at home to Purdue, Iowa has lost four straight and at 4-6 overall, is staring at missing a bowl game for the first time in five seasons.

Remaining are two enormous challenges for the Hawkeyes against No. 23 Michigan and No. 16 Nebraska, both of whom are currently tied atop the Legends Division with 5-1 Big Ten records. This week's contest against the Wolverines is Iowa's

first against a top 25 opponent this season in any of the major college football polls.

“We have another opportunity on Saturday to go out there and show people that we can still play football,” senior cornerback Micah Hyde said. “Maybe we’re not playing to be in the national championship game, but we’re definitely playing for each other and that’s what it comes down to.”

Even during this stretch where little (if anything) has gone right for the Hawkeyes and losses continue to mount, the players have somehow managed to stick to their normal game-prep routine. The losses take their toll, but the players – and perhaps more specifically, the seniors – make their best attempts at moving forward, even with only two weeks likely remaining.

“You got to almost be a little bit like a jet pilot,” senior defensive tackle Steve Bigach said. “There’s really not any time to look back. You got to move forward. If you take time looking back and wondering about ‘what-ifs, what could’ve been, should’ve been,’ then you’re going to spend most of all your time doing that and it’s really not productive for you.”

Preparing for Robinson and Gardner

The biggest question surrounding Saturday’s game is the status of Michigan quarterback Denard Robinson and whether he returns for his Senior Day or back-up quarterback Devin Gardner makes his third consecutive start for the Wolverines.

Michigan head coach Brady Hoke told reporters Monday in Ann Arbor that Robinson remains “day-to-day.” The senior signal-caller suffered a nerve injury in his arm during the Wolverines’ 23-9 loss to Nebraska on Oct. 27 and hasn’t played since, although he did dress in full uniform last weekend when Michigan played Northwestern.

Gardner, who originally came to Michigan as a quarterback, was

being used this season as a wide receiver before he made the switch back to quarterback following that Nebraska loss. He has guided the Wolverines to two straight wins over Minnesota and the aforementioned game against Northwestern won in overtime, 38-31.

With Robinson's "day-to-day" prognosis from Hoke in mind, the Hawkeyes find themselves having to prepare for both quarterbacks and are expecting both Gardner and Robinson to take snaps regardless of which one starts.

"It's a little bit tricky because you have two preparations," Ferentz said. "They're not that much different, but they're not the same either."

"Robinson is just so quick and elusive, so there will be more designed runs with him in there. Gardner is a little bigger guy, but he can run it, too. When he gets outside, he's dangerous."

One thing that Iowa might have at its advantage (if there are any) is familiarity with both. While Robinson has appeared in each of the past three meetings between these teams, but played none of those three games start to finish. In Iowa's 24-16 win over Michigan last season, Gardner came in for two plays just before halftime, one of which was a 2-yard completion right before Robinson tossed an interception hauled in by linebacker Christian Kirksey.

"I'm just worried about what their scheme is going to be and what they're going to bring to the table," said junior cornerback B.J. Lowery, who had a fourth down pass break-up that sealed Iowa's win last November. "We're not really worried about whoever's back there. We just got to play hard. Whoever's back there, we just have to deal with it."

Boffeli reflects back on first start

The one major surprise last weekend came along the offensive

line. After rotating back-and-forth the prior two games between junior Nolan MacMillan and redshirt freshman Jordan Walsh at left guard, it was junior Conor Boffeli getting the nod at left guard and making his first career start doing so.

Not only did Boffeli start against Purdue, but he played the entire game at left guard without being substituted for either MacMillan or Walsh. Boffeli played his first significant game action after spending years listed behind senior James Ferentz at center on the team's 2-deep.

"I think Conor has been breathing down my neck for a few years here," James said. "Hopefully it has been 'iron sharpens iron' a little bit, but he's a really talented player. I think Brian [Ferentz] would be the first one to tell you that along with my dad.

"A lot of the credit goes to him and how he has carried himself these past few years."

Boffeli said he had gotten practice reps with the first-string offense at right guard before but that his first real look at left guard came in practice shortly following Iowa's 24-21 loss to Indiana. He added that he was made aware that he'd start by the coaching staff following the team's Thursday practice.

"Last week, at the beginning of the week, they told me they wanted me to play a little left guard, so I went and started there and I was competing with Nolan MacMillan," Boffeli said. "Then one thing led to another."

One aspect of Boffeli's play that both James Ferentz and senior Matt Tobin took notice of was his way of being able to communicate as though he were an experienced starter like them as opposed to an upperclassman finally get his first real crack at playing time.

Boffeli credits that to the experience he has gained as the

back-up center and from that competition he has had with James.

"The center on our O-line makes the calls," Boffeli said. "He tells everyone where to go, so if you can master that position, I was able to know where to go. It was a pretty easy switch inside."

Hitchens confirms benching

Junior linebacker Anthony Hitchens confirmed Tuesday he was benched during last weekend's game against Purdue, saying the reason he wasn't out there was "Coach's decision." Hitchens, who added that he was healthy, was taken out during the second half and remained on the sidelines.

"I always got to be motivated every week," Hitchens said. "We've got a lot of good linebackers that can play all three positions, so I just got to focus more this week than I did last week and have a better game."

In addition to Hitchens being benched, junior linebacker James Morris also was hurt during the second half. As a result, Kirksey from LEO over to WILL (which he originally played when he became a starter last season) and inserted sophomore Quinton Alston and redshirt freshman Travis Perry into the game. Alston took over for Morris while Perry occupied the LEO spot Kirksey was playing at prior to Hitchens being benched.

"I knew they were going to hold their ground and do a good job throughout the game," Kirksey said about Alston and Perry. "As for myself, I was just getting ready to play a different position and being ready to play wherever coaches need me to play."

Hitchens, who currently leads the Big Ten in tackles, was listed as a starter along with Morris and Kirksey on Iowa's 2-deep released earlier in the week. As for what he took away from watching his performance against Purdue, Hitchens said

things such as footwork, knowing coverages and not blowing assignments were stressed most to him.

“There was stuff that shouldn’t be done at this time of season and unfortunately, we didn’t accomplish that last week,” Hitchens said. “So it’s definitely going to be a challenge to get better this week.”

Injury update

Ferentz opened his press conference Tuesday saying there wasn’t anything new on the injury front. When asked specifically about the playing statuses of sophomore running back Mark Weisman and junior fullback Brad Rogers, he remained pessimistic.

“Brad might be able to do something on special teams. If we could get that, we’d be really happy with that,” Ferentz said. “Weisman is going to do some work. He’s improving, but I don’t know if it’s enough. It’s one of those things where we’re day by day.”

Rogers has missed the last three games due to an undisclosed injury. As for Weisman, he hasn’t played since leaving the second quarter of Iowa’s 28-17 loss to Northwestern on Oct. 27 with an injury that was previously described by Ferentz as a strain.

Martin-Manley returning home, sort of

As a kid growing up in Pontiac, Mich., sophomore wide receiver Kevonte Martin-Manley was the biggest Michigan Wolverine fan in his family. He idolized players such as Braylon Edwards, Mario Manningham, Adrian Arrington and Jason Avant.

Like Martin-Manley, all of those former Wolverines were wide receivers. Also like Martin-Manley, all of them were coached by Erik Campbell, who played at Michigan and was the receivers coach there under Lloyd Carr before joining Ferentz’s staff at

Iowa in 2008.

Martin-Manley was once so passionate about the Wolverines that he snuck into Michigan Stadium during the middle of a Michigan NIT basketball game against Miami (Fla.) back in March 2006. He said he left the game at halftime and managed to sneak in because there was construction going on around "The Big House."

"I was only 13 years old," Martin-Manley said. "That was the only time I was in the stadium and I wasn't supposed to be in there."

"I vividly remember walking around the field, running around, getting a feel for it."

As Martin-Manley prepares for the experience of actually playing on the field, he said he has found himself not only asking Campbell about his playing days as a Wolverine, but also about those players he gravitated towards when he was younger that also had that chance to play for Campbell.

"I always ask about them," Martin-Manley said. "Every other day, I'm asking Coach Campbell, 'What did these guys do on the field? Off the field? Did you coach the same way?' Thing like that, I try to get out of him."