

11/20/2012: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming season finale against No. 17 Nebraska during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Nov. 20, 2012, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – While the Iowa Hawkeyes continue their preparations for their Black Friday finale against No. 17 Nebraska, the story reaching the Hayden Fry Football Complex Tuesday afternoon was the same one making its way around the entire collegiate athletic landscape.

Over the past 48 hours, the Big Ten has increased in size to 14 schools with the additions of Maryland and Rutgers to the conference. While a timetable hasn't been determined yet for when Rutgers starts competing athletically in the conference, Maryland is set to officially join in 2014.

"It's a sign of college football, sign of the times," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said. "It's where we're all going, it seems like. One thing that seems inevitable is change. It's going to happen."

Ferentz reiterated his confidence and support in Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany, saying he has "done a great job of providing our conference with great leadership." Beyond that though, he said very little about expansion and how it would affect Iowa in the future.

Senior cornerback Micah Hyde won't be around to play either the Terrapins or Scarlet Knights. But the Fostoria, Ohio native did mention how unusual it is to wrap his head around, especially while still getting used to Nebraska in its second season competing in the Big Ten.

"Obviously, growing up being a Big Ten fan, you know the teams that have been in it before," Hyde said. "Now it's Nebraska, so that's kind of weird. Now you're adding Maryland and Rutgers."

"It's going to be weird. You're not going to be used to it for a while. But it's going to add on and people are going to start getting used to it."

Preparing for Black Friday

Iowa currently sits at 4-7, knowing full well that a bowl game won't be in the picture this year. But that hasn't changed the mindset of Ferentz or any of his players, even when that bowl preparation time in December isn't there to develop younger and inexperienced team members.

"We'll approach this game like we would any. We'll do our best to win this game," Ferentz said. "I didn't want to alter who goes in and that type of thing."

Senior wide receiver Keenan Davis described Friday as "Iowa's

bowl game," between it being the end of the Hawkeyes' season and the Heroes Game trophy introduced prior to last year's meeting being at stake between these two teams. Adding to that is the role of spoiler Iowa could play, as a Nebraska win secures the Cornhuskers' spot in Indianapolis for the Big Ten Championship Game against Wisconsin on Dec. 1.

"It's a rival game. It's a trophy game," Davis said. "We're not going to go out there and be like, 'Oh, it's our last game. Woe is us.' We're going to go out and try to win that trophy."

If Iowa's going to have any chance though, one obstacle it will have to overcome is the short week of preparation with this game being played on Friday. These teams met on Black Friday last season, with the Hawkeyes on the losing end of a 20-7 outcome where Iowa looked flat in all three phases.

Even with the week off from classes, the players say they know the importance of managing time accordingly.

"You got to be smart as an athlete," junior linebacker James Morris said. "We're lucky this week to be off from school and have more time to focus on the things I need to. But we lose 24 hours.

"Twenty-four hours of doing nothing makes a big difference in the grand scheme of recovery. When you only have seven days to recover, now we only have six. It makes a difference, but we've just got to be smart and have a plan."

Facing a more confident Martinez

One of the biggest reasons for the Cornhuskers' success in 2012 has been the play of their junior quarterback, Taylor Martinez.

Perhaps best known outside Nebraska for his poor throwing mechanics over the course of his career, Martinez has wowed

this fall with his arm, having thrown for 2,420 yards and being among the league leaders in pass efficiency. Even more remarkable is that he has done this while Nebraska has been mostly without the services of running back Rex Burkhead, who has been injury-plagued throughout 2012.

Morris and Hyde both made the same comment Tuesday about how they've noticed a more confident Martinez while studying him on film.

"He's more sure of himself and I think it really starts with him," Morris said. "They're better than last year. They would agree with that and I'm not going to deny it, either."

In addition to what Martinez has done through the air this season, he has still proven to be just as effective on the ground. He has 792 yards rushing thus far and combined with his passing total, Martinez leads the conference in total offense averaging 292 yards per game by himself.

"If he gets out of contain, he's a dangerous player. And he can hurt us with his arm now, too," Hyde said. "You got to contain and I think that's the biggest word of the season, is 'contain.'"

"It's going to be a tough task."

Seniors' last hurrah

For 19 Hawkeye players, Friday will mark the final time they ever wear an Iowa uniform. Like past seniors before them, they'll be introduced individually before the Hawkeyes' home finale and get a chance to be greeted on the field by family members.

It will be a unique experience for senior center James Ferentz, who is the fourth of Kirk & Mary's five children and the second of their sons to have a Senior Day inside Kinnick Stadium.

As for senior quarterback James Vandenberg, Friday will bring his career somewhat full-circle. Before signing his letter of intent with Iowa back in February 2008, the Keokuk native was being courted heavily by Nebraska during the recruiting process.

“That is cool. I’ve had a lot of experience with that program through the recruiting process,” Vandenberg said. “Obviously, they’re a tremendous program. To be able to end my career against them and just have the opportunity is something I’m really going to be looking forward to.”

Once they walk off the field Friday, it’ll be for good for some of the seniors. Vandenberg wants to follow in his father’s footsteps working in an E.R., while defensive tackle Steve Bigach looks to start medical school next fall.

Then there are those like senior strong safety Tom Donatell. He won’t be playing on Sundays next year, but like his father Ed – who is the defensive backs coach for the San Francisco 49ers – Tom said he intends to keep football a big part of his life and pursue the coaching business.

“I want to be a coach. I want to finish up Friday and then kind of get caught up in the coaching aspect of it,” Donatell said. “We’ve had a couple of talks with a couple places – GA positions, small schools, stuff like that. It’s an exciting time, but right now, I’m really just focused on this game and trying to get a win.”

Familiar face on the opposing sidelines

Among the coaches who will be roaming the Nebraska sidelines Friday afternoon at Kinnick Stadium is its defensive line coach, Rick Kaczenski.

If the name sounds familiar, well, it should. Kaczenski had previously spent seven years working on Ferentz’s staff at Iowa, including five seasons as the Hawkeyes’ defensive line

coach. A week prior to Iowa's contest against Oklahoma in the Insight Bowl last December, Kaczenski had made the decision to leave Iowa.

Two days following that announcement, Kaczenski was brought on board by Nebraska head coach Bo Pelini and even coached in the Cornhuskers' 30-13 loss to South Carolina in last season's Capital One Bowl.

When asked about Kaczenski leaving to join Iowa's newest rival, Ferentz said he didn't think much of it aside from wishing him well and added that he didn't hold any grudge towards Kaczenski for joining Pelini's staff at Nebraska.

"People move and you really can't control where they go," Ferentz said. "I've said this before: I try not to decide for our staff members what's best for them or what's in their best interest.

"At the end of the day, you have to do what's best for you. That's one thing this profession teaches and I think all professions probably do."

Fisher family divided

While redshirting last season, linebacker Cole Fisher made the trip to Lincoln, Neb., for the Hawkeyes' inaugural Big Ten showdown with the Cornhuskers. But not because he was part of Iowa's 70-man travel roster.

Cole's older brother, Sean, is a starting linebacker for the Cornhuskers and was last season when Nebraska defeated Iowa. When they met inside Memorial Stadium last November, he sat in the visitors' section along with his father, while his mother and other relatives sat with the Nebraska crowd.

Now that Fisher will actually be on the Iowa sidelines for Friday's game, there's even more of a family divide for this year's game.

“They’ll be cheering for both of us,” Fisher said about his parents’ rooting interests. “I’m sure my mom will whip out her half-and-half, Iowa and Nebraska shirt and all that fun stuff.”

While his family members haven’t been able to decide who will sit where, Fisher said it would be half-and-half like it was one year ago. He also said that playing his older brother’s team hasn’t kept the two of them from talking to one another, even as recently as Monday night.

“My little brother just played in the state championship game in high school, so we talked about that,” the Omaha native said. “I’d talk to him right now. Usually, when I’m looking for some advice, he has been through this whole thing and been through a very similar situation, so whenever I have a hard time, I’ll ask him and see what he did.”

Even though the Fisher brothers won’t actually see each other directly on the gridiron at the same time, having the opportunity to make add to this rivalry on a personal level is something Cole appreciates.

“Now actually being in it, it definitely means a lot more,” he said. “Hopefully, I play well. It’s going to be cool.”