

# 2013 Big Ten Media Days – Day One takeaways



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz responds to a question asked during the 30-minute Q&A session done following his main press conference at the 2013 Big Ten Football Media Days on Wednesday, July 24, 2013 at the Hilton Chicago.

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CHICAGO, Ill. – In the past whenever I've covered Big Ten Football Media Days, I would listen to head coaches' press conferences and then compile a list of general observations I've made over the course of the day. But the Big Ten had a slightly different format in place this year, one that I found more than welcoming over the course of the day.

This year, for the first time I can remember anyway, coaches and players both were made available to the media on the first day of this two-day event here in the Windy City. In the past, only television reporters got access to players. Each coach and the three players they brought with them were given their own individual podiums for 30 minutes allowing reporters to

fire away with whatever questions they had.

Now the only players I ended up speaking to were the three guys from Iowa – linebackers James Morris and Christian Kirksey and offensive tackle Brett Van Sloten. However, I got different perspectives hearing each head coach than what I've been accustomed to and found myself spending time around all 12 of them Wednesday. So with that in mind, I've compiled a list of takeaways I took hearing each of them speak. I'll go in the order they were presented by the conference:

***Pat Fitzgerald, Northwestern:***

With the Wildcats coming off a season where they won 10 games as well as their first bowl victory since the 1949 Rose Bowl, expectations have risen in Evanston and Fitzgerald has embraced it.

The main takeaway from hearing the Big Ten's second-longest tenured head coach speak Wednesday is that he knows exactly what he has and what his team is capable of. Fitzgerald called his current group of players "the most confident and experienced" he has coached and the momentum surrounding his program has skyrocketed this year. But he also realizes none of it means anything if Northwestern isn't able to take advantage of that positivity currently existing.

"We're excited about the future, but that's talk," Fitzgerald said. "It's all about action now."

***Darrell Hazell, Purdue:***

Hazell enters his first season at the helm at Purdue, but he's far from a Big Ten rookie. Prior to his previous head coaching stint at Kent State, Hazell was the wide receivers coach for seven seasons at Ohio State under the influence of former Buckeye coach Jim Tressel.

From hearing him speak Wednesday, I think Purdue made a very

good hire that could pay off for the Boilermakers down the road. But it appeared rather obvious that he's trying to build a new culture. So much so that he even coined a new nickname for Ross-Ade Stadium earlier this spring – "The Furnace."

"I thought Purdue needed a stadium identity," Hazell (again, a guy who once coached at a school who plays at "The Horseshoe") said. "So I was down in Naples, Fla., with one of our alums. We were talking during breakfast one morning and he started throwing some things out and came up with something-furnace, so I came up, 'The Furnace.'"

### ***Gary Andersen, Wisconsin:***

There are plenty of Big Ten teams whom currently have a quarterback dilemma on their hands. The most intriguing case might very well be at Wisconsin.

Andersen enters his first season as the head honcho in Madison and actually had the experience of coaching at Camp Randall Stadium last year while in charge at Utah State. Except the Badger QB he faced that night is no longer with the program. In fact, he got demoted as the starter shortly afterwards. Joel Stave looked poised to take over for the foreseeable future, only to suffer a season-ending injury that set the stage for Curt Phillips (who was recently given a sixth year of eligibility by the NCAA) to lead Wisconsin to a win in the Big Ten Championship Game and a third straight appearance in the Rose Bowl.

So the question for Andersen is this – go back with the guy who led Wisconsin to a string of victories before getting injured, or stick with a guy who had his struggles, but came up in some huge moments late last season? Despite neither playing against his Utah State squad, Andersen said he knows what both signal-callers are capable of from watching tape. But he also made clear the spot was up for grabs.

"It's a different coaching style, it's a different coaching

staff, it's a whole other 4-5 months, it's a different offense," Andersen said. "So they walked in with a pretty clean slate, but we had an idea of what they had done the year before."

### ***Tim Beckman, Illinois:***

Before hearing Tim Beckman speak for myself, I noticed he was the "Mr. Worldwide" of Twitter. I didn't see what he said in his main press conference, but heard his trending on the social media site was in correlation to how loud he spoke at the dais.

Voice volume aside, there was something else I took away when I got to hear him – I get the feeling he's more worried about the perception of his team (which wasn't good last season and probably won't be again this season) than he lets on. I asked him directly what he took away from his first season in Champaign and how it might allow him to grow as a coach and he said the following:

*"We're going to be a positive atmosphere. We're not going to let the negativity infiltrate our program."*

Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but I would think after a season like Illinois had, it would almost be better off confronting the criticism head on and using it as a motivator. The question I have about the Fighting Illini going forward is whether it can learn from mistakes when they happen. Because mistakes will happen and criticism will come of them. It happens everywhere.

### ***Kevin Wilson, Indiana:***

Say what you will about Indiana's football program, which hasn't exactly lit the world on fire over the past two decades. But this is a team going in the right direction, mainly because of the guy in charge – third-year head coach Kevin Wilson.

He wouldn't say his team turned a corner winning back-to-back games against Illinois and Iowa like it did last season, but the guy has a confident aura about him that I feel is going to eventually rub off on his players this season, so much so to the point where I'd be surprised if Indiana wasn't bowl-eligible in 2013.

The most telling moment from the seven minutes or so I was around him Wednesday came when a reporter asked him a question about Nebraska.

*Reporter: What do you think of Nebraska? I know you don't get them this year...*

*Wilson: We'll get them. Championship Game.*

*Reporter: OK. So if you get there...*

*Wilson: IF? I don't answer "If" questions.*

### ***Brady Hoke, Michigan:***

Simply put – Hoke was made to coach at a school like Michigan. I can see why he might rub people the wrong way, especially those in Columbus, Ohio. But there was a moment that stuck with me when I was around Hoke Wednesday afternoon.

It came when a reporter asked him about how [he recently offered tickets to Michigan's game against Ohio State to a 12-year boy in Ohio, a Buckeye fan, who named his recently removed brain tumor "Michigan."](#) Standing there as he explained his act of kindness, Hoke showed a side of himself that people probably rarely see publicly, even up in Ann Arbor.

*"We're glad, in this instance, he beat 'Michigan,'" Hoke said. "That's probably the only time I'll say it, but it's important."*

*"I think we've got a great, unbelievable opportunity to help kids and help people understand this is a great rivalry, it's*

*the greatest there is, and it's competitive and it's passionate. But at the end of the day, there's a heck of a lot more things important than just that rivalry."*

***Bo Pelini, Nebraska:***

Every coach has a buzz word. The one I heard Pelini use repeatedly Wednesday was "potential."

Whether it was in response to a question about a very inexperienced front seven he has on the defensive side of the football, or in response to being asked about having a four-year starter at quarterback in Taylor Martinez, Pelini kept harping on "potential."

But in saying (and repeating) this word, Pelini also threw out a bit of caution.

"At the end of the day, potential doesn't win football games," Pelini said. "It's going to be how they execute and how they compete."

***Mark Dantonio, Michigan State:***

As he explained what he believed led to Michigan State's fall from grace last season where it went 7-6 following two seasons that featured a co-Big Ten title and an appearance in the first Big Ten Championship Game, Dantonio made the comment that he needs "leaders" in 2013.

I asked him to elaborate on that particular part of his statement and the vibe I got from Dantonio on Wednesday is that he has more leadership in place this coming fall not just because he has a larger senior class, but because of how those seniors presently distribute out on the Spartans' depth chart.

"I think when you have a great season, your seniors usually have their best season at that respective school," Dantonio said. "That's what we're looking for. Last year, we had nine. Nine guys. Some of those guys didn't play as much of the

others.

"This year, we have 18 guys and all of them travel. Quite a few of them are starters and all of them have major roles on our football team. Probably 95 percent have a major role."

### ***Urban Meyer, Ohio State:***

Between the arrest on murder charges of his former tight end Aaron Hernandez at Florida and [recent legal issues surrounding the Buckeyes earlier in the week](#), the spotlight was clearly on Meyer Wednesday. It was going to be anyway because many see Ohio State as the runaway favorite to win the conference, but this just added to the frenzy.

No coach had a larger crowd surrounding him Wednesday than Meyer, and it wasn't even close. What I found interesting from the time I spent as part of this hoard of reporters around Meyer was that while he said he typically ignores whatever negativity is mentioned with him, it's when "stereotyping" (as he put it) comes into play when he feels he needs to address a matter.

"There have been incredible kids at the University of Florida, there are incredible kids at Ohio State and unbelievable coaches with great hearts," Meyer said. "A guy makes a mistake and it impacts everybody. We're not the only program in the country that makes mistakes.

"We've made too many. I've self-evaluated and I've evaluated our staff and how we do our business and we're continually making sure we do it the right way. That's never changing."

### ***Jerry Kill, Minnesota:***

The theme sticking with me after hearing Kill speak Wednesday is identity. The Golden Gophers are coming off a bowl appearance last season (his second in Minnesota) and has an opportunity to build off that.

Kill understands that success comes with establishing an identity (at least one that's not anything like his predecessor's) and if I were a Golden Gopher fan, hearing the following ought to be somewhat encouraging at this particular point in time:

*"I think that our state is very hungry for success and a good football program," Kill said. "That's our job, to give them a program that resembles the state of Minnesota and I think that's why we're a good fit."*

*"When we were at Northern Illinois, we always recruited that kid that had the edge, the hard nose. I think that's the same thing at Minnesota. It's who we are. Let's be who we are."*

**Bill O'Brien, Penn State:**

A year after inheriting an absolute mess in State College that includes Penn State still having a postseason ban each of the next three seasons, stability is starting to form for O'Brien, at least more of it than he had 12 months ago.

I asked O'Brien a question similar to the one I asked Beckman earlier about what he learned from that first season in charge. The one area in his coaching he believes has significantly improved is with organization. There's familiarity between the players and his staff. There's continuity on his staff. O'Brien is starting to put more of a structure in place, and he believes being more organized has a lot to do with that.

"The main thing I learned from last year was what to be prepared for in the second year," O'Brien said. "On game day, practice days, early training camp, end of training camp, how it relates to class schedules. All these different things."

"I think I'm better than I was organizationally than I was a year ago."



## **Kirk Ferentz, Iowa:**

Ferentz repeatedly brought up being “enthused” and “excited” for this upcoming season and the reason why is simple – inside the trenches.

Two groups he spoke glowingly about Wednesday were his offensive line (which got torpedoed with injuries right when the Hawkeyes’ six-game losing streak to end last season began) and his defensive line (which was very inexperienced in 2012). Not only is there experience now on both lines that didn’t exist last fall, but there’s also depth. And if Iowa does rebound from 4-8 and return back to the identity it has always been known for under Ferentz, these are the two areas to look at.

Ferentz on the offensive line: *“We’ve got five guys back that had starting experience last year and Nolan MacMillan has had some in his past, so I think we’re further along in that regard.”*

Ferentz on the defensive line: *“With all of these up-tempo offenses, it probably wouldn’t hurt to have 8-9 guys in the rotation. So we’re hoping to get to that point.”*