

9/3/2013: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Missouri State during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Sept. 3, 2013, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa — Last weekend's season opener against Northern Illinois provided the Iowa Hawkeyes with a mixed bag. The outcome wasn't what Kirk Ferentz or any of his players desired as Iowa lost 30-27 in heartbreaking fashion to the Huskies and obvious negatives led to that final result, but there were also plenty of things Ferentz felt positive about after watching the tape.

First, there was the play of his first-year starting quarterback, sophomore Jake Rudock. The defining moment of the game came late in the fourth quarter when Rudock threw an out-route to Kevonte Martin-Manley that was jumped by Northern Illinois corner Jimmie Ward and intercepted. That turnover led

to the Huskies kicking a game-winning field goal with four seconds remaining. But Rudock also led a pair of touchdown drives in the second quarter – both of which came in the red zone – and finished 21-of-37 passing for 256 yards.

“His demeanor on the sideline was good. He was calm and confident,” Ferentz said. “The feedback that we got from him was really accurate.”

As an offense, Iowa amassed 302 total yards in the first half alone and ended up with over 200 yards on the ground. But that total yardage number was nearly cut in half during the final 30 minutes of play and the Hawkeyes could only muster a 44-yard field goal in the second half after holding a 24-17 halftime lead.

Defensively, the game plan was centered around forcing Northern Illinois quarterback Jordan Lynch to beat Iowa through the air after he rushed for 100 yards against the Hawkeyes last season. As it had planned, Iowa kept Lynch in check on the ground, as he only rushed for a total of 56 yards on 22 carries. Unfortunately for the Hawkeyes, he did beat them with his arm as he compiled 275 yards passing off 25 completions and threw three touchdown passes that were all over 20 yards each.

Senior free safety Tanner Miller believed a major reason the Huskies compiled explosive plays wasn't so much miscommunication within the Iowa secondary, but rather issues with technique, which he added was a major emphasis of discussion by defensive coordinator Phil Parker in the aftermath of Saturday's loss.

“Anything technique-wise, you can work on and fix,” Miller said. “That's what we're going to have to do. We didn't have a lot of missed tackles, but giving up the big plays, that's what we've got to fix this week.”

Then there was the fake punt. Iowa was lined up in punt safe

and sensed Northern Illinois looking to run a fake when it did late in the third quarter. Both Ferentz and his players described what happened as nothing more than “a mental error” after correctly diagnosing the fake.

“We have the right people out and we have the miscommunication on one thing that took place and that opened the door,” Ferentz said. “Just makes it tough.”

Lowery, Lomax looking to return this week

Iowa saw both of its starting corners leave last weekend’s game against Northern Illinois with injuries, but for now at least, the plan is for both senior B.J. Lowery and sophomore Jordan Lomax to be back with the first-string secondary unit Saturday when the Hawkeyes face Missouri State.

Lomax left the game during the second half after he said he felt a tweak in his left hamstring and didn’t return after having tape wrapped around his leg by trainers. On Tuesday, Lomax said he tried to rest it as much as possible and would return to the practice field whenever trainers gave him the O.K. to do so. He was replaced in the game by true freshman cornerback Desmond King.

“It’s starting to feel better,” Lomax said. “I’m just doing rehab now, taking it day by day.”

As for Lowery, his issue was cramps-related. He actually returned to the field after dealing with cramps in one calf before his other calf cramped up on the play Northern Illinois scored its third touchdown of the afternoon on to tie the game at 27-27 apiece in the fourth quarter.

“When I was pressed against No. 85, as he went to do the slant-and-go, I kind of looked inside at the quarterback and that’s something I shouldn’t have did,” Lowery said. “I was trying to get a pick and he just didn’t run the route I expected. He went vertical.

"I was trying to get the ball at its highest point. I guess I didn't."

Hitchens leaving biggest impression yet

Ferentz was asked during his press conference Tuesday about the progress made by his senior kicker, Mike Meyer. His response not only mentioned Meyer, but other players he thought performed well last weekend. The one comment that stood out were his remarks about senior linebacker Anthony Hitchens, who recorded 13 tackles against Northern Illinois.

"That's the best I've seen Hitchens play, ever," Ferentz said.

Ferentz elaborated by saying Hitchens looked more decisive and credited that to experience being a second-year starter at the WILL linebacker spot. Fellow senior linebacker James Morris said he wasn't surprised to hear Ferentz say that in light of the improvement he believes Hitchens has made mentally as a player.

The third senior linebacker of the trio, Christian Kirksey, made a similar remark about the mental side of Hitchens' game improving.

"Hitch is playing very fast," Kirksey said. "You know, he's seeing a lot of stuff, especially watching more film. He's playing fast and just talking with him, he's seeing stuff quicker."

Using Alston as a pass rusher

Iowa introduced a new defensive wrinkle last weekend during its contest against Northern Illinois. While it was well-known that sophomore linebacker Nate Meier would be used as a pass-rush specialist on third downs, the Hawkeyes not only used him at an end spot, but junior linebacker Quinton Alston as well.

While Iowa wasn't able to record any sacks of Huskie quarterback Jordan Lynch, there were instances where the

Hawkeyes were able to pressure him and part of the reason was using Alston and Meier as pass-rush specialists when Northern Illinois faced third-and-long as opposed to running more nickel and dime packages defensively.

"As a defense, our coaches are trying to present different looks for offenses, looks that are going to challenge them," Morris said. "So obviously, a linebacker coming off the edge is a lot faster than a 280-pound D-lineman.

"We're trying to get the right personnel out there for us that's going to be able to challenge the offense and also make plays for us on defense."

Ferentz said Tuesday that the use of Alston along the front four wasn't used solely for last weekend's contest, but rather an experiment that the defense will continue using as part of its defensive line rotations.

"We'll fool around with that on the obvious passing downs," Ferentz said. "Just hoping to get a little bit more change of tempo out there."

Scouting Missouri State

Saturday's contest against Missouri State marks the sixth time in as many seasons Iowa has played against an FCS opponent and the Bears are the fifth FCS opponent during this stretch to make a visit to Kinnick Stadium.

Coming from the Missouri Valley Conference, Missouri State enters this game with an identical 0-1 record after losing 23-17 at home to Northwestern State on Aug. 29. The Bears are coached by Iowa City native Terry Allen, who was a candidate to replace Hayden Fry at Iowa following 1998 before the job was ultimately given to Ferentz.

As far as Missouri State's offense is concerned, a few Iowa players noted similarities in the Bears' style of play to that

of Northern Illinois' in terms of having a mobile quarterback and running an up-tempo offense. Defensively, the Bears are one of just a handful of teams Iowa will face this season that run a 3-4 defense as its base.

As of now, each of the next three seasons feature Iowa playing an FCS opponent, with two of those teams being among the seven to beat FBS programs last weekend. Northern Iowa, who makes a fourth visit in 10 years to Kinnick Stadium in 2014, left Jack Trice Stadium in Ames with a 28-20 win over Iowa State on Saturday. One night earlier, North Dakota State – a team that has won the last two national championships at the FCS level and will visit Iowa City in 2016 – upset defending Big 12 champion Kansas State, 24-21.