

10/1/2013: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Michigan State during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2013 at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The word of the week is “defense.” As Iowa prepares for its Homecoming clash against Michigan State this weekend, defense is what should be the focus inside Kinnick Stadium with both the Hawkeyes and Spartans posing two of the Big Ten’s top defenses thus far in 2013.

In the case of Michigan State, the Spartans lead the conference in seven different defensive categories – total defense (188.8 yards per game), rushing defense (58.2 yards per game), passing defense (130.5 yards per game), scoring defense (13.2 points per game), pass defense efficiency (36.6 percent completions), opposing first downs (12 first downs per game) and opposing third-down conversions (21 percent). The

total and passing defense numbers not only lead the Big Ten, but the entire nation five weeks through the season.

The opportunity of facing this caliber of defense leaves players like junior left tackle Brandon Scherff excited about taking the field.

"They're a big, physical unit," Scherff said. "We're looking forward to that. That's Big Ten football right there."

Meanwhile, the Hawkeyes present a formidable unit themselves as they rank in the Big Ten's top third of all seven of those categories led by Michigan State. In fact, Iowa's total defense ranks second in the conference surrendering 265.6 yards per game and the Hawkeyes have yet to give up a rushing touchdown through five contests.

If there's anything that appears different from recent meetings between these two clubs, it might be a slight difference in Michigan State's play-calling as the Spartans have a new offensive coordinator this year in Jim Bollman, who had previously worked along with Dantonio on Jim Tressel's staff at Ohio State, serving as the Buckeyes' offensive coordinator. But even with that, head coach Kirk Ferentz and his defensive players all feel nothing is too dramatically different.

"I think it's pretty similar for the most part," senior linebacker James Morris said. "I mean, they want to run the ball and do that effectively. That is a pillar of their program and what they want to do."

Dominating inside

The strength of Iowa's defense in 2013 has been the linebacking corps and rightfully so. Its senior trio of James Morris, Anthony Hitchens and Christian Kirksey has lived up to the billing through five contests and Morris was recently named the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Week after

recording eight tackles, a sack and an interception that sealed the Hawkeyes' 23-7 win over Minnesota last weekend in Minneapolis.

But there's also a junior duo of defensive tackles – Louis Trinca-Pasat and Carl Davis – that probably warrant the same amount of attention right now. The Golden Gophers were held to 30 yards rushing and one of the biggest reasons why was those two not allowing Minnesota to pick up any yards inside the hashes.

"They were trying to run in our A-gaps and that's where Carl and Louie were," senior defensive end Dominic Alvis said. "You saw the result. They got 30 yards. Carl and Louie are some of the toughest guys I've been around and they're great at taking on double teams."

Earlier in the day, Michigan State head coach Mark Dantonio likened Davis – a Michigan native that was recruited by Dantonio before he ultimately chose to play at Iowa – to one of his former defensive linemen, Jerel Worthy (now currently with the Green Bay Packers). Upon hearing the comparison, Davis initially said he was shocked, then revealed how Worthy was someone he spent the offseason studying closely as he went through his development into the player he is today for the Hawkeyes.

"He was very disruptive," Davis said in his assessment of studying Worthy. "I mean, he got in the backfield, made tackles for loss and made big plays. He was a big guy, but he could move well."

While Davis is continuing to grow with his first significant on-field production this year, Ferentz feels the year Trinca-Pasat gained as a starter last season has allowed him to make strides now.

"I think that year of experience has given him the confidence to be able to play and compete," Ferentz said. "He's a tough-

minded guy.”

O-line gelling

If there’s one area of the Hawkeye offense worth focusing on this week, it’ll be the offensive line. Last weekend against Minnesota, it was a big reason for Iowa’s success with the Hawkeyes accumulating 464 yards of total offense, including 147 yards rushing from junior running back Mark Weisman.

“Last week, we had a good week of preparation – two good practices and then Thursday, our shell day (helmets and shoulder pads only), it was more of a thinking game from a technique stand point and all that,” Scherff said. “I thought we had a good day with that and you know, just coming in here, watching the film and helping each other.

“We’re set in the right direction, but we have a long ways to go.”

One bit of good news regarding the O-line came out Tuesday, as senior left guard Conor Boffeli said he would be good to go for Saturday’s contest against Michigan State despite re-aggravating an injury to his knee on the final play against Minnesota. Boffeli was able to walk off the field and Ferentz said the West Des Moines native was able to run Sunday when the team got back together.

“[Ra’Shede] Hageman was going for the tackle on the running back and he just kind of fell into the side of my knee. That was it. A little tweak, nothing major,” Boffeli said. “It was the same knee I injured in the Iowa State game. I didn’t know what was going on. I just felt a little bit of pain and I just stayed out there. I didn’t want to move or walk on it or anything until [the trainers] got out there.”

The timing couldn’t be better for Iowa’s O-line to start becoming more cohesive, as it faces its biggest challenge to date with Michigan State’s front seven, which features an

experienced linebacking corps and a defensive end in Shilique Calhoun who has three defensive touchdowns already by himself.

“They’re big, they’re physical and their linebackers will run and make plays,” sophomore center Austin Blythe said. “That’s something we’ve got to be prepared for and we just got to show up and play on Saturday.”

Getting Powell started

Last weekend’s game at Minnesota showcased the speed of junior wide receiver Damond Powell, who scored his second career touchdown on a tunnel screen pass where he managed to find an opening and turn on his jets.

Earlier in the week when Ferentz was asked about Powell as a play-maker, he left the junior college transfer off a list of players’ names he responded with. On Tuesday, he spoke more glowingly of Powell.

“He’s fast and we all know that, but the thing I’ll harp on with him is his positive energy,” Ferentz said. “He loves playing football. I think one of the upsides of getting a guy who has gone to a JC is he appreciates the opportunity.”

Ferentz said the onus is on him and his staff to get Powell started whenever he’s on the field, mainly because they know what the end result will be more times than not given Powell’s speed. Also playing that role in helping get Powell started is sophomore quarterback Jake Rudock.

When asked about Powell’s speed, Rudock said it was evident the first time he threw a pass to him while he ran a go-route. The signal-caller also made mention of knowing when to initiate communication with the play-making wideout, especially on plays like the one Powell scored on last weekend – a play that wasn’t an audible, but was designed specifically for him.

"Sometimes, you might talk to him. Other times, it's just, 'Hey, play your game,'" Rudock said. "That's something you might say before the game and that's something that you actually talk about right before."

Ferentz believes Powell has gained confidence with each week, which is why he is becoming more of a focal point in Iowa's game plan now as opposed to earlier in the season.

"He's doing a good job at practice and that's the most important thing," Ferentz said. "You start climbing the ladder by what you do during the week."