

10/15/2013: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game at No. 4 Ohio State during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2013, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – In one sense, the bye week Iowa just endured came at an ideal time for the Hawkeyes. With at least seven known players who dealt with some sort of injury during Iowa's 26-14 loss to Michigan State back on Oct. 15, the bye week provided them a chance to get closer to full recovery. It also provided the Hawkeyes a little extra time to prepare for their upcoming opponent and given who the next opponent is, that might prove handy for Iowa this weekend.

That's because the Hawkeyes are heading to "The Horseshoe" to play one of their toughest games in years on Saturday when they visit No. 4 Ohio State. This contest marks the first time since 2010 when these two teams last faced each other that

Iowa's playing an opponent ranked in the AP top 10 (the Buckeyes were ranked eighth at that time). Ohio State not only enters 6-0, but has won 18 straight dating back to last season when Urban Meyer took over as the Buckeyes' head coach.

"You don't do that by accident," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said about the Buckeyes' current winning streak. "That requires good players, good coaching. It requires players that understand you have to show up every week and they've done a great job of that now for a year plus."

Because Iowa had the first of two bye weeks, Iowa was able to implement portions of the game plan earlier than usual and some players were able to get a head start on studying Ohio State film. Typically during game weeks, players receive the game plan from coaches on Tuesdays. This week, they received bits of the game plan on Sunday.

"It's definitely good to know ahead of time," junior running back Mark Weisman said. "But they had the same type of thing. They also had a bye this week, too, so there's no advantage either way."

In addition to preparing for the Buckeyes, Iowa also used the week to refine itself. One area that was heavily worked with last week was special teams, which came under fire after allowing Michigan State successfully executed a fake punt.

Last week, Ferentz suggested he might not attempt to return a punt again this season and the reaction nationally was strong. When asked Tuesday if he was still leaning that direction, Ferentz didn't really budge one way or the other.

"I'm not real interested in seeing another fake, so whatever it takes to stop the fake, we'll do that," Ferentz said. "I went home that night and saw one in the Northwestern-Ohio State game, too. I can't get away from it, so we'll see what we can do."

Getting ground game re-energized

If the Hawkeyes are going to have any shot of pulling off a monumental upset Saturday afternoon (as of Tuesday evening, Iowa is listed as a 16.5-point underdog), the running game will have to be there for them.

Prior to playing Michigan State, Iowa's ground game was viewed as a strength. Weisman was among the nation's top leading rushers and the Hawkeyes had just won a game over Minnesota by pounding the Golden Gophers into oblivion. But in that loss to the Spartans, the run game unraveled. Iowa only ran the ball 16 times and finished with a meager 23 yards rushing.

Part of that was due to Weisman injuring his foot, which he said Tuesday would be good to go for this weekend. But a lot of it had to do with Michigan State's defense being suffocating.

Now Iowa will face a similar challenge against an Ohio State squad that also features a stout front seven despite six of the starters being new from a year ago.

"If you didn't know the background and you could throw the film on, you'd see a group that is very talented and plays well," Ferentz said. "Whatever does open up doesn't stay open very long and that's the sign of a good defense."

Through six games, the Buckeyes have only surrendered an average of 86.2 rushing yards per game (second in the Big Ten behind the Spartans). Of the 13 touchdowns Ohio State has given up, only three of them have come on the ground.

"We've got to control the line and just keep fighting," Weisman said. "If they get us for a two-yard stop, we've just got to keep fighting and keep going. Hopefully, it breaks through."

Horseshoe historically unkind

Iowa's last victory inside Ohio Stadium came on Nov. 2, 1991. To put this into perspective, senior offensive tackle Brett Van Sloten was celebrating his first birthday on that date and Weisman was only five days old.

Since that 16-9 victory over Ohio State, the Hawkeyes have lost each of the last six times they've visited Columbus, including each of the four times a Ferentz-led team has played there. In fact, the Buckeyes' lone blemish to Iowa since then came in 2004 at Kinnick Stadium when the Hawkeyes won 33-7 en route to a co-Big Ten title.

"There are a lot of tough venues. This is certainly at the top of the list in the conference," Ferentz said.

The most recent defeat inside the Horseshoe is probably the most gut-wrenching of all, however. With James Vandenberg (then a redshirt freshman) starting in place of an injured Ricky Stanzi at quarterback, Iowa overcame a 24-10 fourth-quarter deficit to force overtime in a game that determined who'd win the Big Ten and represent the conference in the Rose Bowl.

But it wasn't meant to be for the Hawkeyes, as Ohio State prevailed 27-24 and later went on to win the 2010 Rose Bowl over Oregon while Iowa ended up winning the 2010 Orange Bowl over Georgia Tech instead. Van Sloten was a true freshman then who didn't get to travel for that game since he was redshirting. But the memory of that defeat was still fresh in his mind.

"I just remember how [Vandenberg] went into that environment," Van Sloten said. "Unfortunately, we fell a little short. But I just clearly remember him stepping up to the challenge and taking the place of Ricky when he went down."

For the majority of the team, Saturday will be a first being inside "The Horseshoe," which currently holds a capacity of 102,329. Then there are those like sophomore quarterback Jake

Rudock, who played there during his junior year of high school. In 2009, he led St. Thomas Aquinas High School (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.) to a 52-7 victory over Ohio's Upper Arlington High School in a game nationally televised on ESPN.

"It was pretty cool," Rudock said reflecting back on what was his first start at QB for St. Thomas Aquinas. "Just being in that environment and being in the [visiting] locker room, it was very interesting."

Returning to the Buckeye State

Iowa features 11 players on its roster who call the state of Ohio home. Three of those 11 players were made available to speak Tuesday afternoon outside the Kenyon Practice Facility and all three hail from different parts of the state.

Junior strong safety John Lowdermilk comes from the town of Carrollton, Ohio, located in the eastern part of the state near the Ohio-Pennsylvania border. Lowdermilk said he not only grew up a Buckeye fan, but that his dad had season tickets and he would be able to attend 1-2 games per season at Ohio Stadium when he was a kid.

Lowdermilk was actually in attendance when Iowa made its last trip to "The Horseshoe" in 2009, rooting for Ohio State. He was even among the masses of fans who stormed the field that night after the Buckeyes made the game-winning field goal in overtime.

"My family went and we tailgated at the game," Lowdermilk said. "We just went and watched the Buckeyes play the Hawkeyes and it was a good game. It was a good environment."

Junior offensive lineman Andrew Donnal grew up in the town of Monclova, which is located in the northwest part of the state near Toledo. Like Lowdermilk, Donnal loved the Scarlet and Gray when he was kid.

But family allegiances changed once Donnal became a Hawkeye and his younger brother Mark recently joined the Michigan basketball program. Not only that, but some refurbishing had to be done inside the Donnal household.

"We had an Ohio State basement," Donnal said. "We came here and we got rid of all that stuff. We had to start decorating with some black and gold, get some Hawkeye stuff in the basement.

"[My brother and I] threw the whole family for a loop and had to get rid of all that stuff because it isn't good anymore."

Senior linebacker Anthony Hitchens hails from Lorain, which is just to the west of Cleveland. Hitchens said his rooting interests as a kid weren't so much at the collegiate level with Ohio State, but rather at the NFL level growing up a Cleveland Brown fan.

But that also isn't diminishing the excitement he has for getting to play close to home this weekend.

"It's definitely an exciting moment," Hitchens said. "I probably won't forget this. It's good to go back home and play in front of your family and your friends. It's a good opportunity and I'm looking forward to it."

With the state of Ohio in the middle of the Big Ten's footprint, Ferentz said it remains a state of priority for him and his staff in recruiting. Defensive coordinator Phil Parker is a native Ohioan and Ferentz's son, offensive line coach Brian Ferentz, currently oversees the bulk of the Hawkeyes' recruiting in Ohio.

"Everybody recruits in Ohio, but if you look around our league, there are a lot of players playing on other rosters that have done well from the state," Ferentz said. "They can't take them all and it's a good football state, so we've been committed to going there."

Ferentz v. Meyer

Saturday's game will mark just the second time Ferentz has coached a game against Meyer. The one previous meeting between the two coaches came in the 2006 Outback Bowl when Meyer was in his first season at Florida. Iowa at one point in that game trailed 31-7, but scored 17 unanswered points in the second half before ultimately losing 31-24.

In just two years at the helm in Columbus, Meyer has raised eyebrows across the Big Ten. One thing he most recently started doing this season was waiting until Tuesdays to release the Buckeyes' depth chart, a tactic that Ferentz appeared irritated by when he wasn't aware of their depth chart prior to his press conference Tuesday.

Despite that however, Ferentz also made clear there's no strain in the relationship between the two coaches. He used the phrase "extremely successful" to describe Meyer as a head coach.

"I guess I'm not a guy that's looking for friends right now. I got friends in my personal life," Ferentz said. "But it has been cordial with everybody in our conference. I can't think of anybody that hasn't been cordial.

"I have a lot of respect and admiration for all of my colleagues in the league and it's pretty much the same way with Coach Meyer, certainly."