

# 10/29/2013: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against No. 22 Wisconsin during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2013, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Every rivalry has key moments that remain forever etched in the minds of many. Three years have passed since the Iowa Hawkeyes and Wisconsin Badgers last met each other on the gridiron, but even this border war is no exception.

That last meeting – which occurred Oct. 23, 2010 at Kinnick Stadium – had a moment one could argue shook both programs to their cores. When then-Wisconsin punter Brad Nortman took the snap and ran right up the middle of the field for a first down instead of merely punting the ball away, it sparked the Badgers. The offense went right down the field and got what ended up being the game-winning touchdown from then-running

back Montee Ball.

Wisconsin reclaimed the Heartland Trophy that day, 31-30. What then followed were an illustrious college career for Ball and three straight Big Ten titles for the Badgers, earning them three consecutive trips to the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif.

As for Iowa, the Hawkeyes saw their Big Ten title hopes in 2010 dashed and three more losses followed that season. Iowa saw itself eventually fall out of the top 25 and it hasn't returned to the polls since.

That play hasn't been forgotten among the current Hawkeye players who were on the field that afternoon. Senior free safety Tanner Miller described it as a play "etched in your mind forever." Senior cornerback B.J. Lowery and senior linebacker Christian Kirksey both were on the field playing special teams when that fake punt unfolded. In fact, Kirksey was among those singled out on national television later that night for turning his head before Nortman began running.

"It was a sick feeling," Kirksey said as he reflected back on one of the lowlights from his true freshman season. "We always want to make sure we get the ball back and when they do a play like that, that you don't expect them to do, that's just a bad feeling to have."

Saturday marks the first time the Hawkeyes and Badgers will meet since that fateful day. The rivalry took a two-season hiatus as a direct result of the Big Ten expanding to 12 teams and forming two divisions. The Iowa-Wisconsin rivalry was the most notable not to be protected with the Hawkeyes in the Legends Division and the Badgers in the Leaders.

This upcoming game between these teams marks a new chapter. With the Big Ten expanding again next year and realigning divisions again in a more geographical manner, the Hawkeyes and Badgers will once again meet on an annual basis like they had before.

The renewal of this rivalry prompted Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz near the end of his weekly press conference Tuesday to say it's the way "it should be," mainly because the two states border and because of the bull-shaped trophy the two teams battle for.

And for the older players like Kirksey, Saturday provides an opportunity to exorcise some demons.

"It's good to have a nice challenge like this, to play Wisconsin," Kirksey said. "They've been to the Rose Bowl quite a few times. It's a great challenge. It's a trophy game, a rivalry game and it will be a physical game."

### **Scouting the No. 22 Badgers**

As for Saturday's game itself, Wisconsin comes in ranked 22nd in the AP poll and 24th in the most recent BCS standings released earlier in the week. The Badgers might also be as complete a team on both sides of the football as Iowa has seen all season.

On offense, the marquee name is junior running back Melvin Gordon, who currently leads the Big Ten in rushing despite being Wisconsin's No. 2 running back behind senior James White. Adding flavor to this storyline is that even though Gordon grew up in the state of Wisconsin and wound up staying closer to home, he was once committed to becoming a Hawkeye.

Reflecting back on his recruitment, Ferentz said he vividly remembers the day Gordon told him he'd join him at Iowa. But even back then, he said he had the sense that it was far from a final decision that Gordon would don the black and gold.

"It's just the way recruiting is," Ferentz said. "I don't think it's ever a surprise when a good home-state player stays in his home state when they have a great program. I think that's exactly what happened."

"He was a guy we liked an awful lot in the recruiting process. We still like him a lot. I'm sure he's still a great young man. He's obviously a very good football player."

With Gordon and White comes the threat of the jet sweep play Wisconsin began to use frequently last season once the former began to take on a bigger role in the Badger offense. Even undergoing a coaching change from Bret Bielema to Gary Andersen, the offense wasn't tinkered with much, if at all. This play is still used regularly by the Badgers and something the Hawkeyes will have to account for on Saturday.

"You just have to play assignment football because they can run multiple things out of jet sweep," Miller said. "They can give it and run the Power-0 play and they can run play-action pass off it, too. So you just have to be sound in reading your keys, making your reads and just playing assignment football."

The other main weapon in the Wisconsin offense is senior wideout Jared Abbrederis, someone Ferentz described Tuesday as one of the best players in the entire Big Ten, regardless of position. Abbrederis is currently third in the Big Ten behind Penn State's Allen Robinson and Michigan's Jeremy Gallon with 43 catches, 752 yards receiving and five touchdowns.

Among those who will be locking horns with Abbrederis on Saturday will be Lowery, who offered nothing but praise toward the Badger receiver on Tuesday.

"It's one thing to hype somebody up, but it's true. He has put up the stats and put up the numbers," Lowery said. "He goes in every week and performs, so you can't really doubt anything about him."

Defensively is where the Badgers are more different from before. While still led by linebacker Chris Borland, Andersen blended his 3-4 scheme with what he was left with upon arriving in Madison. To this point, it has been a success. Wisconsin gives up an average of 285 yards per game, second in

the Big Ten to Michigan State's vaunted defense. In fact, the Badgers are also second in the Big Ten in scoring defense (15.9 points per game), second in rush defense (87.6 yards per game) and third in pass defense (197.4 yards per game).

The only other time Iowa has faced a 3-4 look this season came Sept. 7 when the Hawkeyes played Missouri State. Of course this time around, it's safe to suggest Wisconsin will present far greater challenges with its 3-4 look to the Iowa offense.

"Sometimes, you're just not sure who's going to come," sophomore quarterback Jake Rudock said when describing the complexity of facing a 3-4 defense. "What your protection is for the offensive linemen, for certain run blocks, it's different. You know, there's not four down linemen, so it just makes it one extra thing to worry about."

### **The influential role of Morris**

Entering this season, it was no secret the strength of this Iowa defense (and the entire team, for that matter) was its trio of senior linebackers. Right there in the middle is James Morris, a Solon native who has evolved into the face of this year's team, the player best exemplifying what Iowa wants to be.

Morris has always been held in high regard by Ferentz and his coaching staff and the Big Ten is now starting to show proper respects. Following the Hawkeyes' 17-10 overtime win over Northwestern last weekend, Morris was named the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Week after coming away with eight tackles, two sacks and a fumble recovery in that game.

Morris has now received the honor twice in his career – and the two occasions came just four weeks apart with the first occurring after Iowa won 23-7 at Minnesota last month. Ferentz said the difference in Morris' game now is simply a result of two things – being healthier than in past seasons and having more game experience to his name.

"One thing about James Morris – anything he has, he'll use," Ferentz said. "Experience is a part of that. Some guys just kind of float through life, so experience isn't that big of a deal. That's not the case with him.

"He's one of those guys that goes back and reflects on everything and studies and improves from it. He's just a heck of a football player."

Morris describes himself as someone who is even-keeled, knowing what buttons to push when. If the mood is too loose, he knows when and how much to tighten it up. If the mood's too tight, he knows when to crack a joke and get a chuckle from his teammates.

"He's hilarious," junior defensive tackle Carl Davis said. "He's real goofy. Sometimes, he tells a corny joke and I just laugh.

"In the tough situations, he gets us all together to make sure we're all ready to go. Then he'll say, 'Hey, it's just football. Let's have some fun out here.'"

As a result, his teammates find themselves gravitating toward him. Even the guys who were once linebackers but have switched changed positions. One of those guys is sophomore defensive end Nate Meier, who mentioned how Morris made the effort off the field to keep him motivated and enjoy the camaraderie inside the football complex.

"When I was a linebacker, he was always a guy who would come pick me up at Hillcrest and ask, 'Hey, would you want to watch film with me?'," Meier said. "He's just a guy you can always count on to be there. He sticks to his word.

"He's the type who is always going to play 100 percent."

Morris has come a long way from the player who filled in for an injured Jeff Tarpinian as a true freshman in 2010 against

Penn State. Like his head coach, he attributes where he is now from where he was then to the experience he has gained.

“As a football player, there are things you always try to improve upon – your size, your speed, your work habits. All of those things,” Morris said. “But the one thing that you can’t get unless you’re on the field playing is experience and sometimes, that’s the most valuable thing.”