

11/5/2013: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game at Purdue during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2013, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – One more victory makes the Iowa Hawkeyes something they weren't last season – bowl-eligible. After missing an opportunity to become bowl-eligible last weekend against now-No. 21 Wisconsin, Iowa gets three more cracks at a sixth victory, starting with – at least on paper – its best chance at a sixth win Saturday at Ross-Ade Stadium in West Lafayette, Ind., against Purdue.

The Boilermakers, who are in their first season under current head coach Darrell Hazell and his staff, look every bit the part of a team entering Saturday's contest with a 1-7 record. Purdue has lost six straight and rank at or near the bottom of every offensive and defensive statistical category not only in

the Big Ten, but the entire country. In fact, the only category in which the Boilermakers currently lead the league is in punting.

Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz likened what Purdue is currently going through under Hazell to his first season in 1999, where the Hawkeyes went 1-10 and were winless in Big Ten play like the Boilermakers currently are. After Hazell left his head coaching position at Kent State to take the Purdue job, he hired John Shoop as his offensive coordinator and Greg Hudson as his defensive coordinator.

Shoop had previously held the same title at North Carolina and before that was the Chicago Bears' offensive coordinator from 2001-2003. Meanwhile, Hudson came to Purdue after serving as a defensive assistant at Florida State for three seasons and he also served five seasons on Glen Mason's staff at Minnesota as the Golden Gophers' defensive coordinator.

"There's a real feeling-out process in terms of your roster and what it is you're trying to do and then what you would like to do versus what your players can do," Ferentz said. "There's a lot of give-and-take there, so I'm sure they're going through that, too."

But one could also make the argument that the Boilermakers' struggles correlate with their schedule to this point. All seven of their losses have come to teams currently possessing records of 6-2 or better – Cincinnati (6-2), No. 24 Notre Dame (7-2), No. 21 Wisconsin (6-2), No. 21 Northern Illinois (9-0), Nebraska (6-2), No. 18 Michigan State (8-1) and most recently a 56-0 shellacking by No. 4 Ohio State (9-0).

"They go out, compete and give their all, at least in every game that I've seen," senior linebacker Christian Kirksey said in reference to what he notices scouting Purdue on film. "We've just got to be ready for an aggressive game. It's a Big Ten game. You have to make sure you're focused."

While the coaching staff is different and even most of the player personnel is different, Purdue also has recent success against Iowa, beating the Hawkeyes 27-24 last season at Kinnick Stadium. That loss hasn't been forgotten among current Iowa players and they use it a reminder to not look past the Boilermakers, numbers aside.

"It's there," sophomore center Austin Blythe said. "We've got that sour taste in our mouth a little bit and I think we kind of think of Purdue as a rivalry game. You know, we want to get after them, go out there, dominate and win the game."

Injury update

On the injury front, the good news for Iowa is it's expected to have back three offensive players – sophomore quarterback Jake Rudock, junior running back Mark Weisman and sophomore right guard Jordan Walsh – for Saturday's game after all three left last weekend's contest against Wisconsin with injuries.

Walsh left the game during the second quarter with a leg injury that looked more severe than it turned out being and was replaced by junior Andrew Donnal, who he has rotated series with at right guard all season. Weisman left the game with an elbow injury that he said Tuesday was fine.

"I was just trying to keep myself up and it gave out on me a little bit," Weisman said. "It's all right now. It'll be fine. Just another football injury."

Then there's Rudock, who left the game with a knee sprain during the third quarter after throwing an interception that led to a Badger touchdown the very next play. He was replaced by redshirt freshman C.J. Beathard, who completed just 4-of-17 pass attempts during the time he was on the field.

Ferentz said after Saturday's game how Rudock could've returned to action Saturday, but the decision was made to keep him on the sidelines and let Beathard finish the game. Rudock

confirmed Tuesday afternoon "there was discussion" about him returning and he said he was itching to get back on the field. He also made clear he'd be back in practice Tuesday and play against the Boilermakers this weekend.

"Obviously, this one's a little more serious than some other ones that might have occurred," Rudock said. "I feel good right now and I should be able to be going."

The news isn't as fortunate for Iowa with senior defensive end Dominic Alvis. Ferentz said Alvis will miss his third straight game Saturday after re-aggravating an back injury from earlier this season during the opening series of the Hawkeyes' game at Ohio State last month. This means junior defensive end Mike Hardy will make his third consecutive start lined up opposite sophomore Drew Ott, with sophomore Nate Meier remaining part of the D-end rotation.

Establishing ground game vs. 3-4 look

For the second straight week, Iowa will be facing a defense that primarily plays with a 3-4 scheme, as Hazell has now implemented the 3-4 look with Purdue after the Boilermakers had traditionally run a 4-3 scheme.

The Hawkeyes struggled to establish much of a ground attack against Wisconsin last weekend, rushing for only 110 yards on 32 carries while using four different running backs. Take away the 43-yard run by sophomore Jordan Canzeri on his first carry during the third quarter, and the final rushing numbers would be 67 yards rushing on 31 carries (just over two yards per carry).

Before last week, the only other time Iowa had seen a 3-4 defense this season came Sept. 7 when it played Missouri State. In that game, the Hawkeyes rushed for 296 yards on 58 carries and Weisman had 180 of those yards on 30 carries, most of which came in the second half after Iowa only led 7-0 at halftime.

"It just switches up the different combinations that you would have," said Blythe, who as a center has to adjust to a nose guard being lined up directly in front of him whenever facing a 3-4 defense. "Instead of the guard and tackle blocking the 3-technique, it's the center and guard blocking the zero nose."

"In terms of assignments, it's a little bit different. But at the end of the day, we're blocking the same five guys we usually do."

One of the heavier topics of conversation Tuesday had to do specifically with Iowa attempting to run the stretch play against Wisconsin's 3-4, which didn't bode well for the Hawkeyes. Of Iowa's 32 carries in the game, the Hawkeyes rushed for 77 yards on eight carries up the middle – including Canzeri's run – and just 33 yards on 24 carries to either the left or right side of the field.

"I don't know if that's much more difficult," senior left guard Conor Boffeli said. "You definitely have to execute a little bit better. There's also a chance as an offensive lineman that you're on a smaller, quicker guy, so it's definitely something you have to kind of adjust to."

Between the familiarity with the type of front they'll be facing and the lack of production Purdue has received from its defense this season, the offensive line is optimistic it'll fare better against the 3-4. It will also need to show improvement in the red zone, as the Hawkeyes have just one rushing touchdown in the red zone in their last four ball games after having at least one in each of their first five contests this season.

"We've just got to be more consistent and make some plays down there," Weisman said.

Collins out, Spearman in

Prior to Iowa's game against Wisconsin last weekend,

linebacker Marcus Collins arrested on an OWI charge the morning of Nov. 1 and was later dismissed from the football team that afternoon. When announcing that Collins would no longer be playing, Ferentz's statement made mention of the reserve linebacker serving a three-game suspension.

On Tuesday, Ferentz gave further elaboration on that suspension. He revealed Collins "broke team policy" prior to Iowa's game against Northwestern on Oct. 26, which is when Ferentz said the suspension first took effect. The following Monday (Oct. 28), Collins' name was removed from Iowa's 2-deep and was replaced by true freshman linebacker Reggie Spearman, who played a prominent role as a rusher in Iowa's third-down "Radar" package the last two weeks against the Wildcats and Badgers. That 2-deep spot once occupied by Collins and now occupied by Spearman is as the No. 2 WILL linebacker behind senior Anthony Hitchens.

When assessing the play of his true freshman linebacker, Ferentz described him as "growing" and made mention of his efforts on special teams in addition to what Spearman has provided the last two weeks when being used in third-down situations. But what makes this story even more remarkable is that Spearman isn't even old enough to vote yet. The Chicago native only turned 17 years old this past August.

"It's just funny that he's out there making plays and going out there, having fun playing the same sport we all love," Kirksey said. "So it does amaze me that he's not 18 yet."

Kirksey also said what he admires most about Spearman is how he plays full speed all the time, saying, "It's something we need." Fellow senior linebacker James Morris made a point about how receptive Spearman is to others, whether it's coaches or other players pointing different nuances out to him from time to time.

"He's just doing a great job of listening," Morris said. "He

just tries to come out and do his best, every day.”

Strong note for Shumpert?

Iowa’s offense didn’t leave too much to be encouraged by in the Hawkeyes’ loss to the Badgers. But one player who showed flashes during the second half of last weekend’s contest was senior wideout Don Shumpert.

The St. Louis native hauled in two catches for 35 yards receiving, but consider that no one had more than three grabs for the Hawkeyes on Saturday and his 35 yards were third behind Damond Powell’s 43 yards and Damon Bullock’s 39 yards. Also consider that his two receptions both came during the second half while it remained a one-possession contest.

In the third quarter, Shumpert hauled in a 18-yard reception from Rudock that put Iowa in Badger territory. The Hawkeyes weren’t able to capitalize on the field position though as that possession ended with them turning the ball over on downs.

Then in the fourth quarter with Beathard in at quarterback and Iowa trailing 14-9, the Hawkeyes faced 3rd-and-5 from their own 10-yard line and Shumpert caught a pass for 17 yards that helped Iowa get further away from its own end zone. However, the Hawkeyes would once again turn the ball over shortly thereafter when Beathard was intercepted on a pass that hit Donnal in the back of the head and led to a Wisconsin touchdown that put the game out of reach.

“Shump was kind of hobbled a little bit for a couple weeks there, but last week, he was able to practice full speed again and did a really nice job,” Ferentz said. “Made a couple grabs there, so that was good to see.”

As a team, Iowa didn’t make the most of its opportunities on Saturday. But Shumpert left an impression – not just on Ferentz, but also his teammates. That impression that was on

public display last weekend is something the players notice all the time with him.

“He’s working his butt off every day. I’m pushing him, he’s pushing me,” sophomore wide receiver Tevaun Smith said. “He has been here for a while, so he knows the ins and outs and he knows the offense as well, so it’s definitely helping out.”

When the season began, Shumpert was starting alongside junior Kevonte Martin-Manley. But drops early on ultimately played a part in him being benched in favor of Smith and not seeing quite as many reps. But after what he showed against Wisconsin, the potential is there for him to be that No. 3 wideout Iowa will need for the remainder of the year.

“He’s one of those guys that’s very soft-spoken, but he wants the ball in his hands,” Rudock said. “He wants to make plays, just like all the receivers do. With this definitely being his senior year, I’m sure he wants to go out with a bang.”