

# 11/19/2013: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Michigan during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2013, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – The scene last year was ugly, perhaps as grotesque a scene as there has ever been following an Iowa football game during the Kirk Ferentz era.

In the penultimate game of a disastrous 2012 season, the Hawkeyes' visit to "The Big House" in Ann Arbor, Mich., was more like a trip to the slaughterhouse, as they got carved apart by Michigan to the tune of a 42-17 final. That defeat sealed Iowa's fate last season, as it was the seventh loss of the year and it made the Hawkeyes miss out on bowl eligibility for the first time since 2000.

As Iowa prepares for its first game against the Wolverines

since that ominous afternoon in Ann Arbor, the improvements made over the past year by the Hawkeyes have been enough in terms of returning to respectability. Not only did Iowa (6-4, 3-3) secure a bowl game after winning its last time out against Purdue on Nov. 9, but now the Hawkeyes are in a position to better themselves and possibly even move ahead of Michigan (7-3, 3-3) in the Big Ten pecking order with a win in their final game at Kinnick Stadium this fall.

"We feel better now than we did last year, but we've got two games left – two really big games – and this week, we're just focusing on Michigan," senior linebacker James Morris said. "We know if we don't win this week, it makes the season less special in retrospect."

One of the major questions coming out of the bye week for Iowa will be how it goes about using its depth at running back, which could play a significant factor Saturday with an expected wind chill temperature of 12 degrees come kickoff at 11 a.m. Central. In that 38-14 victory over the Boilermakers, the Hawkeyes rushed for 318 yards on the ground. Sophomore running back Jordan Canzeri – who has been the No. 3 back behind juniors Mark Weisman and Damon Bullock all season long – accounted for 165 of those rushing yards on 20 carries.

Ferentz said while Canzeri might be the freshest of his running back options, he believes the bye week came at a good time for players like Weisman and Bullock.

"I won't say they're worn down, but like our whole team, I think everybody gets a little bit tired as the year goes on," Ferentz said. "It's a long season. Last week gave our guys a chance to maybe get their legs back. Hopefully, that's the case."

### **Facing Gardner again**

If the Hawkeyes were the meat being butchered in that slaughterhouse last year, the Wolverine player doing a huge

chunk of the butchering was quarterback Devin Gardner. In what was only his third career start as Michigan's signal-caller, Gardner accounted for 351 yards of total offense and all six of the Wolverines' touchdowns that day, en route to being named Big Ten Offensive Player of the Week.

Through the air, Gardner was 18-of-23 passing for 314 yards and threw three touchdown passes. His other three touchdowns all came on the ground while rushing for 37 yards on nine carries. Michigan was also working his predecessor, Denard Robinson, back into the line-up and the two of them both had their way with the Hawkeyes.

"That game last year, they caught us off guard a little bit with what they did," senior free safety Tanner Miller said.

Gardner is now a junior and has led a Michigan offense that has been inconsistent for most of the season. The struggles have been even more magnified this month in the Wolverines' losses to Michigan State and Nebraska, as well as their most recent contest – a 27-19 win over Northwestern that took three overtimes to accomplish. In those last three games, Gardner has just two touchdown passes and only one rushing touchdown. Not only that, but he has also had minus-59 yards rushing in those three contests while being sacked 19 times.

Part of the reason for the high number of sacks has been the ability of opposing defenses to effectively blitz Gardner when he drops back to throw. Ferentz downplayed the idea that Iowa might blitz more than usual on Saturday, but he also made clear that getting pressure on Gardner is a must if the Hawkeyes are going to be emerge victorious on Saturday.

"The issue for us is we're not a big blitz team. Our percentages are probably way lower than most people," Ferentz said. "Typically for us to get there, we've got to get there with our front four. That is an area we need to improve on.

"It's going to be a challenge. But we certainly can't let him

get comfortable back there and we can't let him get outside, either. He did that a few times last year and we paid for it."

If there is a positive Iowa is attempting to find out of what happened last season, it might simply be the fact that the Hawkeyes have experience facing Gardner unlike most of Michigan's opponents this season. As a result, they're hoping that prior experience – as unpleasant as it was for them – can be of benefit preparing for him this time around.

"He's a different kind of mobile than some of the other quarterbacks we have played," Morris said. "More of his success I think is when he does things on his own as opposed to designed runs.

"He's probably more organic in that sense, so that's a different challenge for us."

## **Senior Day**

The last three Senior Days have been unpleasant ones for the Hawkeyes, who haven't won a home finale at Kinnick Stadium since their Orange Bowl season of 2009.

Iowa will recognize its 15 seniors before kickoff Saturday. Among them will be guys like Morris and Miller, who have both been staples of the Hawkeye defense for the majority of their careers (Morris becoming a starter as a true freshman and Miller becoming a starter early in his sophomore campaign).

The defensive side of the football will be most notable, as all three of Iowa's starting linebackers – Morris, Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens – are playing their final games at Kinnick Stadium on Saturday. Morris and Kirksey have started together for each of the past three seasons, while Hitchens became the starting WILL 'backer last season as a junior, when he led the Big Ten with 124 tackles.

"They're really good team-oriented guys," Ferentz said of his

three senior linebackers. "All three of them are just tremendous that way. Good with the younger guys, good with the older guys. Anything that we're doing, they're in the front. I'm talking about things away from football, too.

"We've had some really outstanding guys at that position and these three guys have really done a nice job of leaving their mark here."

There's also the possibility that defensive end Dominic Alvis could return for his final home game Saturday. Alvis injured his back last month against Michigan State and hasn't played any defensive snaps since the first series of Iowa's 34-24 loss at Ohio State on Oct. 19.

Among the offensive players to get recognized Saturday will be right tackle Brett Van Sloten (who has been one of the Hawkeyes' captains all season) and tight end C.J. Fiedorowicz, who has a team-high four touchdown receptions this season.

Then there's special teams. Mike Meyer took over kicking duties as a true freshman in 2010 and has been Iowa's place-kicker ever since. Meyer had endured plenty of ups-and-downs as a specialist, but enters his final home game 14-of-18 on field goal attempts this season and a perfect 31-of-31 on PATs.

He reflected back on what was perhaps his biggest down as a Hawkeye – missing a pair of field goals during a 22-21 loss to Minnesota in 2011. A sophomore at the time, Meyer said it was as distraught as he had felt about himself at any point in his career and that a conversation with then-center James Ferentz at the time helped make change his outlook permanently.

"I think that was kind of the point where I felt like my teammates were still behind me," Meyer said. He added that the biggest takeaways for him during his career have been becoming mentally tougher in addition to being detailed.

Meyer isn't the only special teamer making his final Kinnick appearance Saturday. For the last three seasons, Casey Kreiter has handled all of the Hawkeyes' long-snapping duties – whether it's a punt, a field goal or a PAT.

Kreiter said his among his biggest takeaways will be what he described as “bits and pieces” of games, such as making his first start in Iowa's 34-7 win over Tennessee Tech in 2011 when the game featured a weather delay. He also said that for him playing long-snapper, it has always been “a science” that consists of the following – practicing, playing, analyzing his practice and play and then fixing it.

“You're always putting money in the bank or taking it away. There's no staying level,” Kreiter said. “If you're going to stay level, you're going to be complacent and complacency is not a good thing.

“I told someone if I ever get to the point in anything I do where I say, ‘That's the best I can do. I can't do better than that,’ I need to stop doing what I'm doing.”