

11/26/2013: Iowa football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game at Nebraska during his weekly press conference held Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2013, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Iowa and Nebraska will meet for the third consecutive Black Friday since the Cornhuskers first joined the Big Ten in 2011 and the two teams are scheduled to continue playing each other on that date up until at least 2019.

This match-up has some of the necessary ingredients in order to be described as a rivalry. It has a set date for when the game is played, the two states represented border one another, there's an annual trophy awarded to the winner and the animosity between the two fan bases is strong.

But is it really a rivalry? Ask Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz

or any of his players, and the answer's a resounding, "Not yet." It's not a no and not a yes. Just, not yet.

"I don't think a rivalry is really something you can culture in a lab, you know, bring Nebraska in and just automatically say it's a rivalry," senior linebacker James Morris said. "It has to be a competitive series.

"If we're going to make it a rivalry, then we need to be competitive and we need to start winning."

Since 1979, these teams have played each other eight times. The Hawkeyes' lone victory over the Cornhuskers during this span came in their Rose Bowl season of 1981. Ferentz is currently 0-4 against Nebraska, including each of the past two seasons since it became a Big Ten member.

"It's probably the kind of rivalry they like," Ferentz said Tuesday during his final weekly press conference of the fall. "It's our job to try and do something about that. That's what we've got to do."

Friday's match-up should be the most competitive in this series since it became an annual event two years ago, as both teams enter off thrilling victories this past weekend. Iowa overcame a 21-7 halftime deficit to score 17 unanswered points and beat Michigan 24-21 to move to 7-4 overall and 4-3 in Big Ten play. Meanwhile, the Cornhuskers enter with marks of 8-3 overall and 5-2 Big Ten after winning three of their last four, the most recent victory being a 23-20 overtime win at Penn State.

If the Hawkeyes are going to make their series with the Cornhuskers more competitive, one area improvement will be needed is offensively. In each of the last two contests between these teams, Iowa only managed to score seven points.

"The biggest thing is always communication for an offense, all 11 guys doing the right thing," sophomore Jake Rudock said in

response to being asked what Iowa has to do well Friday. "You know, that's big for every single game. The keys are always kind of the same. You want to run the ball well, you want to pass the ball well."

Developing a short-week routine

Football players and coaches are creatures of habit. Their weeks are scheduled out in such a structure that sticking to routine becomes vital toward success.

For the third year in a row, Iowa and Nebraska meet on Black Friday. From the Cornhuskers' perspective, playing annually on the day after Thanksgiving is nothing new.

But for the Hawkeyes, this is still a relatively new deal. Even though Ferentz is the dean of Big Ten coaches, the shorter week of preparation only got thrown at him and his program once Nebraska joined the conference.

Ferentz reiterated his initial displeasure about not only playing on Black Friday, but during Thanksgiving weekend, but he also acknowledged it was something he had to accept going forward. Not only is Iowa scheduled to play Nebraska on each of the next six Black Fridays after this year, but continue doing so without the luxury of a full seven-day week to prepare (none of the Hawkeyes' bye weeks between 2014-2019 fall on the weekend before playing the Cornhuskers).

As far as preparation this week is concerned, he believes a routine has been developed that not only he, but his coaches and players also, are all comfortable with.

"I thought last year, our preparation was good. The week was good as far as what we were trying to do," Ferentz said, referencing last year's contest at Kinnick Stadium that Iowa lost 13-7. "We feel comfortable this week. If this was in the first half of the season, first quarter especially, it would be a real challenge. Second half of the season, six days is

realistic.”

Sophomore center Austin Blythe said not much needs to be altered from the players’ perspective, other than pushing its typical Monday off from the practice field back to the weekend after the Hawkeyes return home from Lincoln. Aiding the players this week is the UI taking the entire week off for Thanksgiving. Without needing to commit time to academics, that extra time at their disposal can be spent on extra film study for Friday’s game.

“Coach always talks about how you got to take advantage of the short week,” senior linebacker Christian Kirksey said. “A lot of times, it can go by so fast that you kind of get out of whack. You got a routine, but you got to make sure you’re sound with watching film, you’re sound with the extra reps in practice and making sure you’re focused because it is a short week.

“Just being a veteran player and being an older player, I kind of can deal with it and work with it because I’ve been in this kind of situation before.”

Defense preparing for two QBs

With Nebraska quarterback Taylor Martinez unable to play in Friday’s contest, the Cornhuskers are likely to continue using two quarterbacks – freshman Tommy Armstrong Jr. and senior Ron Kellogg III – when they face Iowa. Both signal-callers have taken snaps for Nebraska in each of its past four games.

Armstrong Jr., has started each of the seven games the Cornhuskers have played minus Martinez and Nebraska’s record in those games is 6-1. But Kellogg III is the quarterback who threw the Hail Mary touchdown pass to defeat Northwestern earlier this month and also played the majority of the Cornhuskers’ most recent game at Penn State after Armstrong, Jr., left with an ankle injury leaving him “questionable” for Friday.

The two quarterbacks have combined to throw 12 touchdown passes this season, which some of Iowa's defensive players said was an example of what makes them different from a quarterback like Martinez that was known more for his athleticism.

"Both have got big, strong arms," Morris said. "They both move pretty well. They switch between the two of them. I'm not really sure why. But we've got to be ready for both. Both are going to be challenging."

While quarterback remains an unknown, Nebraska presents one known offensive commodity that might provide one of the toughest challenges yet for Iowa's defense. Junior running back Ameer Abdullah currently leads the Big Ten in rushing with 1,483 yards on a league-high 231 carries. If Abdullah rushes for 100 or more yards Friday against the Hawkeyes, he would be the first Big Ten back to rush for 100-plus yards in every conference game since former Iowa running back Shonn Greene did so during his Doak Walker Award-winning season in 2008.

Over the last four games since Nebraska began utilizing both Armstrong Jr., and Kellogg III as quarterbacks, Abdullah has rushed for 502 yards on 98 carries. In other words, the Cornhuskers will look to get him around 25 carries on Friday.

"He's a great running back who has speed and likes to bounce it outside and hurt you with his quickness," Kirksey said. "That's something that's a challenge for us and we have to make sure we're sound in tackling."

For all the Bloomin' Onions?

All seven bowl-eligible Big Ten teams (including Iowa) won't know for certain until Dec. 8 what bowl each of them will play in.

However, if the conference does end up getting two teams into

BCS bowls, the winner of Friday's game in Lincoln could potentially be looking at a trip to the Outback Bowl, which is played on New Year's Day at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla., against an SEC opponent.

Should the Cornhuskers win Friday, the probability of them winding up in Tampa would be extremely high since they've never played in the Outback Bowl. If the Hawkeyes win however, they would have head-to-head victories over all three teams they would be competing with for any bowl after each of Ohio State, Michigan State and Wisconsin gets taken.

An Iowa victory would also draw more parallels between this season and 2008, when the Hawkeyes last won three straight November games to finish 8-4 before beating South Carolina 31-10 in its most recent Outback Bowl appearance in 2009.

Besides the Outback Bowl, there are three other likely bowl scenarios for Iowa, depending on how it fares Friday at Nebraska. The Buffalo Wild Wings Bowl (formerly the Insight Bowl) picks after the Outback. Should the Hawkeyes make a third trip in four years to Tempe, Ariz., they would play a Big 12 opponent on the night of Dec. 28.

If neither Tampa nor Tempe prove to be final destinations for Iowa, the Gator Bowl would pick next, followed by the Texas Bowl, which is the furthest the Hawkeyes could fall if there are two BCS teams from the Big Ten. The Gator Bowl is played in Jacksonville, Fla., on New Year's Day against an opponent from the SEC, while the Texas Bowl is in Houston on Dec. 27 against a Big 12 opponent.