

Ferentz, Miles prepare for the unfamiliar

By Brendan Stiles

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The courtesy was on display from the get-go. Just as Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz called into the Outback Bowl's joint coaches teleconference Monday morning, there was his 2014 Outback Bowl counterpart – LSU head coach Les Miles – already on the line and immediately extending an olive branch.

“I just want to greet ya and say I look forward to competing against ya. You’ve always run a quality program,” Miles said directly to Ferentz before answering the first question asked by a reporter. “We know each other in passing as you know, and again, I look forward to seeing you in Tampa.”

For all the friendly banter exchanged between the two coaches though, the theme of Monday's teleconference turned out to be unfamiliarity. That first question asked to both Miles and Ferentz was about who the other's team reminded them of in their respective conferences. He didn't give a specific SEC team, but Miles said Iowa reminded him of the ones that are balanced and are talented top to bottom. Ferentz didn't even attempt to compare LSU, who is currently ranked 14th in the AP poll and 16th in the last ever BCS standings released Sunday night, to a Big Ten team. He did say from watching glimpses of them in years past that weaknesses are hard to find.

“We know they're going to be talented, we know they're going to be very well-coached,” Ferentz said. “They've done a great job in the SEC and if you just look at their results this year, the fact they're the only team to beat Auburn, that probably starts and ends the discussion right there.”

Two other components add to the current state of unfamiliarity. One such component is that Miles wasn't LSU's head coach the only other the Hawkeyes and Tigers have met on the gridiron. In fact, Miles took over for Nick Saban shortly after Iowa defeated LSU 30-25 in the 2005 Capital One Bowl. In the nine years he has coached the Tigers, they've won the SEC twice and have made two appearances in the BCS National Championship Game, with one of those resulting in a 38-24 win over Ohio State in Miles' third season at the helm.

Miles does have a Big Ten background having played at Michigan in the 1970s for Bo Schembechler and then later serving as an assistant on his staff during the final years of his Michigan tenure. When asked about the perception of the Big Ten in contrast to the SEC, Miles said "the Big Ten can compete with any league."

"We recognize that quality teams in the Big Ten can play with any team," Miles said. "We played Ohio State in the national championship, we lost to a Joe Paterno-coached Penn State team. We understand that this is going to be a very competitive game against a very quality league."

The second component of this unfamiliarity will slowly evaporate over time as the two coaches are able to study their opposition in the coming days and weeks leading up to their New Year's Day clash at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla. Neither Miles nor Ferentz have had much time since Sunday's announcement to study the other and in Ferentz's case, it will be more of a challenge with LSU starting true freshman quarterback Anthony Jennings in place of an injured Zach Mettenberger, who recently had surgery done on his injured knee suffered in the Tigers' most recent contest against Arkansas.

Jennings entered that game in the fourth quarter and engineered a game-winning drive that spanned the length of the field. The series was capped with a 49-yard touchdown pass

with 1:15 remaining that gave LSU a 31-27 advantage it would hold onto against Arkansas.

“The good news is he comes in on the last drive of the regular season and starts on the minus 1-yard line and was really efficient, does what he’s supposed to do, shows poise,” Miles said of Jennings. “I think his start and I think with what [offensive coordinator Cam Cameron] has done with him all year long, I think we’re looking for a real quality performance from him in the bowl.”

Meanwhile, Ferentz was asked about his signal-caller, Jake Rudock, and said he expects him to start for Iowa in the Outback Bowl despite leaving the Hawkeyes’ most recent game – a 38-17 win over Nebraska – with a knee injury during the third quarter.

“He should be absolutely fine,” Ferentz said. “We don’t anticipate any issues there. He could’ve gone back into the Nebraska game, but we just didn’t see any merit in it and we’ll continue to work C.J. [Beathard] like we have.

“Both those guys have improved a great deal and we expect Jake to be the starter. Hopefully, C.J. continues to improve as this month rolls along.”

Now come the next three weeks, in which Ferentz and Miles can become more acquainted with one another, as well as with what both can expect when they bring their teams to Tampa later this month.

“I recognize it’s a destination in and of itself,” Miles said. “It’s sunny. There’s so much to do. I think the Louisiana faithful enjoy that. I think they’re very comfortable in a sun-drenched environment and a bowl-festive city.”