

12/29/2013: Outback Bowl notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz and LSU head coach Les Miles take part in a joint Outback Bowl press conference held Sunday, Dec. 29, 2013, at the Wyndham Tampa Westshore in Tampa, Fla.

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TAMPA, Fla. — One conference is nationally viewed as the standard in college football. The other gets viewed in a more maligned manner.

Once again, the 2014 Outback Bowl features Big Ten vs. SEC. Once again, the SEC is favored with LSU (9-3) coming in ranked 14th in the AP poll while Iowa (8-4) is unranked.

But with this match-up between the Hawkeyes and Tigers comes intrigue. For Iowa, this is its fourth trip to the Outback Bowl and the Hawkeyes possess a 2-1 record in those three previous contests. Iowa has also beaten LSU in the Capital One Bowl and Missouri (before it became a member of the SEC in 2012) in the Insight Bowl under head coach Kirk Ferentz.

While bowl games provide the only true glimpse he gets into the SEC, Ferentz is fully aware of what his team's facing and what's being said on the outside.

"You'd have to be blind to college football to not recognize the level of talent and level of coaching in the conference," Ferentz said during a joint press conference with LSU head coach Les Miles on Sunday at the Wyndham Tampa Westshore. "[LSU] has got outstanding players and they're very well-coached and I think there's a lot of that going on in the league."

Then there's LSU. Since Miles – a former Michigan player and assistant under Bo Schembechler – took over in 2005, the Tigers have played Big Ten teams twice in bowls. They beat Ohio State to win the 2007 BCS National Championship and lost the 2010 Capital One Bowl to Penn State. LSU has also lost each of its last two bowl games and three of its last four when including that Penn State loss.

Hearing what Ferentz said about the SEC, Miles immediately chimed in with his thoughts on the conference he once associated with.

"That conference is a tremendously competitive and very capable football conference," Miles said about the Big Ten. "The more you study it and the the teams that [the Hawkeyes] have played and have exceeded in beating, the Big Ten is every bit as capable as any conference in America."

The coaches' take on Jennings

A topic that has, still is and will probably continue being discussed between now and New Year's Day is that of LSU true freshman quarterback Anthony Jennings taking over as the starter following a season-ending knee injury to starter Zach Mettenberger.

[Much like his players who spoke to *HawkeyeDrive.com* on](#)

[Saturday](#), Miles described Jennings' poise as being his biggest attribution to the Tiger offense and how he (at least to this point) doesn't seem phased by the limelight he's experiencing.

Miles also mentioned how during practice, he and offensive coordinator Cam Cameron have gone about placing greater expectations upon Jennings when it comes to team-oriented drills.

"We've put a little bit more of a burden on him in terms of preparing to handle the huddle, handle the play call," Miles said. "That, besides the physical execution of the play, is maybe a little bit more of a burden."

When Ferentz was asked about Jennings on Sunday, he referred to him as "the wild card" because the amount of film to study of him is limited. The comparison to Jennings and former Indiana quarterback Antwaan Randle El (also coached by Cameron) was made during the press conference and with that, Ferentz was asked if any similarities between the two might lead to wrinkles in LSU's play-calling.

"I wish it was three days of preparation, not three weeks," Ferentz said. "We have to be ready for anything, but I don't expect a wholesale change. We might see a wrinkle or two. But I think philosophically, what they try to do, we expect to see that."

Familiar names among offensive coordinators

There's Cameron, in his first season as LSU's offensive coordinator. As mentioned, he was the head coach at Indiana when Ferentz first took over Iowa. He also has ties to Michigan – much like Miles, so there's a sense of familiarity there.

Then there's Iowa offensive coordinator Greg Davis, who is about to complete his second season in that occupation. Before Miles became LSU's head coach in 2005, he was the head coach

at Oklahoma State for four seasons and faced Davis four times back when the latter was Texas' offensive coordinator during that same timeframe (2001-04). Davis and the Longhorns won all four meetings against the Cowboys.

"I think any offensive coordinator does what he thinks speaks to the talent set that he has," Miles said. "I think what he has done is a real quality footprint, if you will, on [Iowa's] success.

"You can see what they're doing. The challenge is stopping it and I think he's a very talented coach. He calls the game with experience and understanding and he's a very capable play-caller."

Juniors dealing with NFL decisions

Both head coaches were asked Sunday about the matter of junior players facing decisions about either leaving early for the NFL or returning for their senior season. [Miles reportedly has a handful of players on his roster](#) in the process of deciding one way or the other following this week's game and this comes after he lost 11 juniors to the NFL after last season.

"I think the key piece when you lose 11 juniors to the NFL a year ago, what you're really talking about is how do you shape leadership," Miles said. "We've tried to do that with those guys who are pointed out by their peers as the best leaders, the capable leaders and grow them and grow your team that way.

"In terms to talking to juniors and them making decisions about those things, I consistently say I'm going to change my approach because the approaches I've used have not been really successful. But it's really their decision."

Meanwhile, Ferentz doesn't have the same dilemma facing Miles after the Outback Bowl about juniors declaring early for the NFL. The only one being discussed was junior left tackle Brandon Scherff, who announced his intentions to return for

his senior year back on Dec. 9.

Ferentz echoed Miles' sentiments about the decision being ultimately up to the player involved and also made mention of how it's more challenging now to convince juniors to come back as opposed to his earlier seasons as Iowa's head coach.

"There are a lot of people on the outside working proactively and creatively in some cases to endear themselves with prospects, without really any stake in the game," Ferentz said. "It's a cold call. You try to invest in a good racehorse, then move on."

"The big thing I want to do is make sure our guys have a good, realistic view of what's going to happen and what it might entail, that type of thing."

****Be sure to visit HawkeyeDrive.com for ongoing coverage from Tampa, Fla., of the 2014 Outback Bowl between Iowa and No. 14 LSU.***