

Ferentz, Miles give final thoughts prior to Outback Bowl



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the Hawkeyes' match-up with No. 14 LSU in the final Outback Bowl press conference held Tuesday, Dec. 31, 2013, at the Wyndham Tampa Westshore in Tampa, Fla.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

TAMPA, Fla. – As Kirk Ferentz and Les Miles spoke for the final time Tuesday morning before Iowa and No. 14 LSU meet in the 2014 Outback Bowl, the mantra of “playing their best football” on New Year’s Day came out of the mouths of both coaches.

From the Hawkeyes’ perspective, it means playing disciplined. Ferentz said with the exception of Iowa’s game against Missouri State back on Sept. 7, he was pleased with his team’s ability throughout the course of the season to limit the number of penalties it got called for. The Hawkeyes enter this

game having only been called for 50 penalties all season, the second fewest among all Big Ten teams.

“As it pertains to our season, I think our guys have shown up and played pretty well each and every week with the exception of one week,” Ferentz said. “To me, it all gets down to how you approach the game individually and where your focus is, your mindset.

“You’re going to have penalties, but the dumb ones, the uncontested ones are the ones that just make it kind of tough to win.”

In describing the Hawkeyes, Miles said how they “have earmarks” of most of the teams LSU faced during SEC play. He joked about the word ‘discipline’ being overplayed by coaches, but added it’s a legitimate term to associate with Iowa.

“What we have to do is play a competitive – play after play, every play – game,” Miles said.

Rudock vs. LSU defense

It’s no secret Iowa strives for offensive balance and Ferentz even reiterated his philosophy about having a balanced attack when asked to describe his unit’s identity.

But in order to beat a team like LSU, the Hawkeyes will need a big game from sophomore quarterback Jake Rudock, who will be playing for the first time Wednesday since suffering a knee sprain against Nebraska that Ferentz said was “fully stable.”

Rudock’s numbers entering this contest might not be gaudy, but they didn’t need to be for him to have the success he has had. When asked about Rudock’s resiliency Tuesday, Ferentz made mention of his toughness both physically and mentally that has allowed Rudock to become the leader Iowa wanted him to be once he was named the starter.

“Every game, every series, things are going to happen that

don't go as planned and it's how you respond, how you react, the toughness you display mentally and physically," Ferentz said. "He has done all those things. He has had bad moments. Everybody does.

"He just keeps focusing on what he can do to get better moving forward and that's what you have to do if you're going to be a good player, especially at that position."

As far as LSU's defense is concerned, it's a group that had to recover from losing a boatload of talent the last several years to the NFL. The Tigers had their issues on defense during the early part of the season, but have shown improvement recently. The eyebrow-raising performance came Nov. 23 when LSU dismantled Texas A&M, who was led by 2012 Heisman Trophy winner Johnny Manziel.

"They're much more seasoned," Miles said. "If you look at the guys, I think the defensive front has certainly improved routinely.

"We've kind of mixed and matched a little bit at safety, but our corners are really prepared. I think they have improved routinely and with any quality team, that has to happen."



LSU head coach Les Miles discusses the 14th-ranked Tigers' match-up with Iowa in the final Outback Bowl press conference held Tuesday, Dec. 31, 2013, at

the Wyndham Tampa Westshore
in Tampa, Fla.

Mettenberger's new role

After having surgery to repair a knee injury suffered in LSU's final regular season game against Arkansas, Zach Mettenberger's career will end Wednesday with him watching from the sidelines as the Anthony Jennings era begins.

Despite the injury however, Mettenberger has remained very active with the Tigers' preparations. Miles said his injured signal-caller is still a team captain and will still take part in the opening coin toss Wednesday.

"He has been in every meeting and the good thing is the playbook hasn't changed," Miles said. "So his reference and his ability to speak to what Anthony's experiencing is really poignant, exactly what should be said. We enjoy his participation in that way."

Over the weekend, both teams took part in a bowl event at Splitsville that featured a bowling contest. Mettenberger participated in the bowling and apparently left his head coach in awe.

"I just happened in late and he had an iced tea in his hand, he had a backpack on, he limped up with a bowling ball in his hand and delivered a strike," Miles said. "I'm sitting there going, 'How in the world does anybody do that with a bad knee?'"

"Just think about your bowling style with a backpack on."

Being aware of Beckham

The third phase could potentially prove pivotal for both teams Wednesday. When he was asked about his special teams unit Tuesday morning, Ferentz listed the accomplishments of players

like senior kicker Mike Meyer and long snapper Casey Kreiter. He even mentioned how sophomore punter Connor Kornbrath had shown improvement over the course of the season.

What might be the biggest special teams concern Ferentz has is LSU wideout Odell Beckham, Jr., returning both punts and kickoffs for the Tigers. Beckham, Jr., heads into Wednesday's game leading the entire SEC with 2,222 all-purpose yards. He's third in the league in kickoff return average, fourth in punt return average and he also returned a missed field goal 109 yards for a touchdown during a game against Furman earlier this season.

He did all of that in addition to being one of two 1,000-yard receivers for LSU.

"They've got a great return guy in both phases, so it's going to be a big, big challenge for us there," Ferentz said. "We can't leave any cracks open."

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