

4/23/2014: Iowa spring football notebook



Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz discusses the new opening on his coaching staff prior to his coordinators' press conferences on Wednesday, April 23, 2014, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The Wednesday afternoon during the Iowa Hawkeyes' final week of spring practice has traditionally been used as one of the few opportunities where both coordinators speak to the media. While this Wednesday was no different with Greg Davis and Phil Parker conducting press conferences, the biggest topic of discussion inside the Hayden Fry Football Complex had nothing to do with what either of them had said.

Last week, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz was left with an opening on his coaching staff following the announcement that recruiting coordinator Eric Johnson – who also served as a co-defensive line coach along with Reese Morgan and had spent all 15 previous seasons as a member of the Iowa staff – was

leaving to pursue a different career path. Hours after the news broke on April 19, [Johnson revealed via Twitter](#) he and his family are moving to Tennessee and that he will be running a Culver's in the town of Hendersonville.

Before either of his coordinators spoke Wednesday, Ferentz took the dais and fielded questions, the majority of which were about the coaching vacancy. He mentioned how there is "a high probability" that whoever fills Johnson's void would be designated the program's recruiting coordinator, but also made clear there was no immediate timetable in place to fill the vacancy.

For the time being, co-linebackers coach Jim Reid will assume the recruiting areas of St. Louis and Indianapolis that did belong to Johnson prior to his departure.

"The biggest thing is to make sure we have our areas covered," Ferentz said. "The other thing that has changed is now we are allowed to have nine guys on the road as opposed to seven. So what we have been doing in the past with seven guys, we still have eight available, so it's not like a big shift.

"If this were January or December, it would be a little bit different. But I think it's pretty easy and it allows us to be more methodical with the process and that's our plan right now."

For Ferentz, the biggest criteria isn't so much that the new assistant has an area of expertise as a recruiting coordinator, but that it is able to fit in right away with everyone and everything else already in place.

"We are just trying to get people that we really think are going to be great fits here, embrace our culture and feel comfortable working with our staff and our staff working with them," Ferentz said. "Then we can tailor the job description or they can learn whatever they have to learn on the run."



Iowa offensive coordinator Greg Davis gives his assessment of the Hawkeye offense through 12 spring practices during a press conference held Wednesday, April 23, 2014, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

Davis details assessment of offense

As Davis begins his third season as Iowa's offensive coordinator, the system he brought with him from Texas appears to be firmly in place. One of the reasons why is the experience returning at the quarterback position with both starter Jake Rudock and back-up C.J. Beathard.

Davis said Wednesday he was pleased with the developments both signal-callers have made this spring. He mentioned how discussions have taken place about possibly rotating in Beathard for a series or two per game next fall to give him more experience. With that said however, there's no doubt in Davis' mind that Rudock has done enough to remain the Hawkeyes' starter.

"First of all, he has a great understanding of everything that's going on," Davis said of Rudock. "Nothing rattles him. He handles himself like a quarterback and he could make all the throws. He has just got more experience.

"We are very pleased with C.J., but we feel like at this

point, Jake is definitely the guy.”

As for other areas of the offense, Davis acknowledged his biggest concern being the depth along the offensive line, even though he said he likes the strides made this spring by the five starters up front. He also mentioned how his greatest emphasis is currently on improving scoring in the red zone, mainly practicing situations where Iowa might have 1st-and-Goal from the 7, 8 or 9-yard lines.

“We had nine 1st-and-Goals at the 7 to 9 and we scored five touchdowns,” Davis said, referencing back to 2013. “That’s not good enough.”

One of Iowa’s most reliable offensive players in goal-line situations last season was C.J. Fiedorowicz. With Fiedorowicz no longer in the picture, how the Hawkeyes use their tight ends – especially early in the season – could be a telltale sign.

Midway through the 2013 campaign, Davis began using what Iowa calls “13” personnel, where three tight ends are on the field at once. It’s a grouping Davis said with hindsight that he wishes he used earlier in the season whenever the backfield was empty and that he would like to continue using it in the 2014 offense.

Should the “13” grouping continue being used, the question then becomes whether Henry Krieger-Coble or George Kittle is used as that No. 3 tight end alongside senior Ray Hamilton and junior Jake Duzey.

“The more things that the tight ends can do and feel comfortable doing, the more that personnel grouping can be a part,” Davis said. “Henry has done a really good job. Henry has great ball skills and is, you know, comfortable moving around in motion, inserting himself. George still lacks some strength. It’s an area that he has to improve on, but he can stretch the field more than most tight ends in the country.

“So there’s a place for all of those guys to get in there.”

From a philosophical standpoint, Davis said the “perfect number” would be Iowa having a 55-45 run-pass ratio. With the passing game, the Hawkeyes currently have five redshirt freshmen competing for 1-2 spots in the receiver rotation. Of the bunch, Davis singled out Derrick Willies has having “a really good spring.” But someone not from that group that he also mentioned performing well right now is sophomore Matt VandeBerg, who was one of the few players to burn a redshirt last season as a true freshman.

“Matt is a guy that can play more than one spot,” Davis said. “When you’re playing with tempo and for the receivers to play in the run and pass game the way you want, you have to rotate some players in there.”



Iowa defensive coordinator Phil Parker gives his assessment of the Hawkeye defense through 12 spring practices during a press conference held Wednesday, April 23, 2014, at the Hayden Fry Football Complex in Iowa City.

Parker weighing defensive personnel options

As a defensive coordinator, Parker has one thing in mind – finding the best 11 players to play. No matter the scheme

being used, having the right personnel remains his top priority.

When Iowa sticks to its base 4-3 look, most of the puzzle seems easy to solve. Parker said point blank senior linebacker Quinton Alston has the MIKE spot held down and he's comfortable with junior defensive end Drew Ott and senior defensive tackles Louis Trinca-Pasat and Carl Davis up front. Also included in that group would be sophomore cornerback Desmond King, who started 12 games as a true freshman last season after filling in for an injured Jordan Lomax.

Beyond those five players and spots, Parker has plenty of options. For that other end spot opposite Ott, there's a 3-way battle brewing with senior defensive end Mike Hardy currently atop the 2-deep. Competing with Hardy are juniors Riley McMin and Nate Meier. Like defensive line coach Reese Morgan did last week, Parker mentioned Meier as someone pushing for the opportunity to be used more on first and second down and not just as a situational end on third down like he was a season ago.

"One thing about Nate Meier is we know he's tough and he was a little bit underweight last year and learning the position a little bit," Parker said. "I think he has really gotten better playing blocks.

"I think Nate put on a little bit of extra weight, is a little bit more active. It's going to be a good battle."

In the linebacking corps, the likely favorites to start alongside Alston are sophomore Reggie Spearman at WILL and junior Travis Perry at LE0. But the linebacker that had Parker raving at the end of his press conference Wednesday was redshirt freshman Josey Jewell, who is now listed behind Perry as the No. 2 LE0 'backer.

"You just watch the film and you just watch the guys running around on tape and you see him tracking guys down," Parker

said. "Somewhere, he's going to have to fit in our system because when you give that much effort and you attack the football the way he does and make plays the way he has done, he's going to probably show up.

"Does he know everything right now? Not yet, but he still has a long way to go."

In the secondary, there's Lomax making the move over to free safety. Parker said Lomax still has a few areas of improvement to make in order to be what he wants as a safety, but also mentioned Lomax having the commander-like traits – being vocal and acting like an assistant on the field – he believes are needed to be a free safety.

With Lomax making that switch, the question becomes who starts at corner. Right now, the 2-deep lists sophomore Maurice Fleming and junior Sean Draper as co-starters. But Parker also said sophomore Greg Mabin is very much in the mix.

"He's a very tall, lengthy guy and he has made a lot of plays for us and he can run," Parker said. "He has not had very much playing time and he has not tackled very much, but he has made some progress there. It's going to be a challenge to figure out."

Then there's the matter of what does get used on third down. In the early part of last season, Parker wasn't afraid of using nickel defense. But during the second half of the season is when Iowa began incorporating its Raider package, which featured two additional linebackers, one of which lined up as a 3-4 defensive end.

Parker said he intends to continue using the Raider package, but that there might be different variations used in 2014. Which variations he uses will be based off his initial mindset of having the best 11 players on the field.

"You have to adapt," Parker said. "The package is still going

to be there. It's just what personnel grouping is it going to be. Is it going to be four linebackers on the field or five linebackers like we had last year? Is it going to be five DBs on the field, still have three linebackers, or four linebackers on the field and two defensive linemen?

"The thing that's going to be the challenge is to see what way we are going to go."

TRANSCRIPTS (courtesy of UI Sports Info.):

[Kirk Ferentz/Greg Davis/Phil Parker \(4/23/2014\)](#)