

Ferentz's answer does not make sense

Written by Jim Ecker

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IOWA CITY - Kirk Ferentz knows more about football than all the rest of us combined, but I'm struggling with something he said after the Iowa Hawkeyes lost to Wisconsin Saturday.

The Hawkeyes were trailing 14-6 when they drove 60 yards to the Wisconsin 20-yard line, where they faced 4th-and-5 with about 5 1/2 minutes left in the game. A touchdown and two-point conversion would have tied it, but Ferentz called for a field goal to try and pull within 14-9 instead.

Keep in mind, Iowa had trouble moving the ball against Wisconsin most of the day and finished with only 236 yards of total offense. That 4th-and-5 situation at the 20 might have represented Iowa's best chance to win the game, perhaps in overtime.

It looks worse in retrospect that Keith Duncan missed the 38-yard attempt, leaving the score 14-6, but the Hawkeyes still would have needed a touchdown to win the game even if they had pulled within 14-9.

I asked Ferentz in the post-game press conference about his decision to go for three points in that situation.

"You have to score twice," he responded. "Somehow, some way, you have to score twice. If it had been something less, like 4th-and-2, we probably would have gone for the touchdown, but 4th-and-5, you know ..."

Score twice? Yes, to win the game, but not to tie it.

"In the situation we were in, we felt that was the best play," Ferentz continued after I asked a follow-up question. "We're going to have to score twice."

"Fourth-and-5 against these guys is not easy, especially down there in the red zone, so we didn't see that as a high-probability play. And we had to get back there again, so it was kind of the thinking there."

I still don't get it. It's not like the Hawkeyes had been marching up and down the field all day. The Badgers stuffed their vaunted running game and held LeShun Daniels and Akrum Wadley to 79 yards on the ground. Meanwhile, C.J. Beathard struggled to find open receivers with Matt VandeBerg sidelined with a broken foot and George Kittle gamely trying to play with a sprained foot that limited his mobility.

Wisconsin dominated the time of possession, 37 minutes to 23 minutes, so even if the Hawkeyes had made that field goal to pull within 14-9, there's no guarantee they would have even touched the ball again.

Wisconsin chewed 4 minutes off the clock and kicked a field goal to make it 17-6 with 1:24 left in the ballgame, giving the Hawkeyes precious little time to salvage the situation, but Desmond King tried his best to make it happen.

King broke loose for a 77-yard kickoff return to the Wisconsin 23-yard line, keeping a possible miracle alive, but the Hawkeyes stalled and faced fourth down at the 7-yard line with about 45 seconds left.

This time, the Hawkeyes really needed two scores in a hurry - a touchdown, a two-point conversion and a field goal to make it 17-17 and force overtime - and this time the decision to kick a field goal made a lot more sense. Duncan hit a 25-yarder to pull Iowa within 17-9 with 43 seconds remaining, giving the Hawks enough time to try an on-side kick, recover the ball and score a touchdown.

It was a long-shot, of course, and the on-side kick failed when it hopped over a Wisconsin player and bounced out of bounds. The Badgers twice took a knee and the Hawkeyes had fallen to 5-3 with their third loss this year at Kinnick.

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Nobody will ever pay me \$4.5 million a year to coach a football team (or write a column), but I think Ferentz made the wrong decision about attempting that field goal when Iowa trailed 14-6 with 5 1/2 minutes left.

Beathard probably would have loved a shot on 4th-and-5 from the 20, but Iowa quarterbacks do not make those decisions and they certainly do not second-guess their coaches in public.

"No, I never question what Coach Ferentz decides on a fourth-down situation," Beathard said when I asked if he had lobbied the head coach. "He knows what's best for the team. If we were able to hit that field goal there it would have been a different situation at the end."

Maybe, but maybe not.

Let's be perfectly clear about something: I have great respect for Ferentz and think he has done a terrific job with the Iowa football program.

He could have left several times for the NFL, but he's stayed and made enormous contributions to the university. He earns his salary and is a major reason Iowa has the money to spend \$89.9 million to refurbish the north end zone area at Kinnick and he's a major reason the UI athletic department operates in the black.

All that being said, the Hawkeyes should have gone for it on 4th-and-5.