

Five Iowa football games to keep an eye on

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Hawkeye fans should have every reason to feel excited about this upcoming season. Iowa is coming off a magical 11-2 season last year that was capped with a 24-14 win over Georgia Tech in the FedEx Orange Bowl. Not only that, but a lot of key figures in the Hawkeyes' success such as quarterback Ricky Stanzi and defensive end Adrian Clayborn are back this year.

I know a lot of fans that have the date of Nov. 20 circled on calendars across the state with hopes that Iowa and Ohio State could both be 10-0 when they meet inside Kinnick Stadium that afternoon.

Lately, I've seen a lot of discussion about trap games. To tell you the truth, I see five games on this year's schedule where Iowa should certainly be favored, but an upset wouldn't surprise me.

Before I give my list here, I will say one game I didn't include is on Oct. 23 against Wisconsin at Kinnick Stadium. The reason for that is because the Badgers are a team I see on par with both Iowa and Ohio State entering this season. Another game I didn't include is the one on Oct. 2 against Penn State, because let's face it, that has already become a big game over the past couple years.

With that out of the way, here are five games Iowa should be favored in, but could be "traps":

1. Sept. 18 – at Arizona

The reasons are plenty. The long travel out West, the late

kickoff time (it will be 7:30 p.m. in Tucson, but 9:30 p.m. in Iowa City), the heat and possible humidity. There are a lot of intangibles that could benefit Arizona entering this game.

Oh, and the Wildcats look to have another good team this season.

Now last season, Iowa did beat Arizona, 27-17, thanks in large part to a dominating display by the Hawkeye defensive line. But one thing that sticks out is how that game ended. The Wildcats made a QB switch late. Out came Matt Scott, and in came Nick Foles.

Foles led Arizona down the field for its only offensive touchdown of the afternoon, and since then, has been the signal-caller for the Wildcats. This season, he is considered one of the top quarterbacks in the country, being on the Davey O'Brien Award watch list entering 2010 (like Stanzi).

Arizona will have a different look this season with new coordinators on both sides of the ball. But this game could reveal a lot about the identity of this year's Hawkeyes.

2. Oct. 16 – at Michigan

I don't expect Michigan to be that much better (if better at all) from what it was in 2009. The Wolverines lost the one playmaker they had on the defensive side of the ball, and Rich Rodriguez has loads of pressure in Ann Arbor to make that team better in his third season.

But here's why this game could be a concern. For one, it's in the Big House, and it's rare to ever see an Iowa-Michigan game in Ann Arbor where the Hawkeyes are favored. The Wolverines are also going to have plenty of playmakers on offense returning from a team last season that put 28 points up on Iowa and nearly had a game-winning drive in last year's game.

Given what Michigan's record is going into this game, I see

the Wolverines having one of two approaches. Either they get off to a good start and gain the type of confidence needed to play a team like Iowa at home, or Michigan comes in reeling after a slow start, and this game becomes "all or nothing."

Considering how the Hawkeyes will be coming off a bye week going into this contest, this is going to be a test.

3. Oct. 30 – vs. Michigan State

This is the only home game I feature on this list, but this is worth noting for a few reasons.

Since Mark Dantonio took over at Michigan State in 2007, the Hawkeyes and Spartans have played three contests that were all decided at the end. Iowa won a double-overtime game at Kinnick Stadium in 2007, 34-27. Then Michigan State responded at home in 2008 with a 16-13 win, highlighted by stopping Shonn Greene on a 4th-and-2 in the game's final minutes. Then of course there was last season in East Lansing, when Stanzi connected with Marvin McNutt on the final play to beat the Spartans, 15-13.

Looking at this season, I expect Michigan State to be much better than it was in 2009. The Spartans have a lot returning on the offensive side of the ball in both the backfield and at the receiver spots. Then there's the return of linebacker Greg Jones, who is the best player at his position in the Big Ten.

After observing Michigan State's 2010 schedule, it wouldn't surprise me to see the Spartans coming into Iowa City with a 7-1 or even 8-0 record. And considering how Iowa will be coming off what is likely a big game the week before against Wisconsin, the Hawkeyes will have to potentially guard against a major letdown here.

4. Nov. 6 – at Indiana

I understand the Hawkeyes have put up 45 and 42 points

respectively on the Hoosiers the last two years. But there's a chance this could be a different Indiana team that what Iowa is usually accustomed to playing.

Like the other teams mentioned, Indiana has a good quarterback returning in Ben Chappell. How good? Good enough to be on the Unitas Award watch list alongside Stanzi and Wisconsin's Scott Tolzien. The Hoosiers also have some playmakers returning on the offensive side of the ball, including wideout Tandon Doss.

Here are a couple other reasons why this game could be viewed as a trap for the Hawkeyes: Last season, it took a ridiculous Tyler Sash pick-six to catapult an insane second-half Iowa comeback featuring 28 points in the fourth quarter. Not only that, but Stanzi also found himself throwing five interceptions in that contest despite leading the Hawkeyes to victory.

It should also be pointed out that because Indiana moved its final home game against Penn State to FedEx Field in Landover, Md., this game is now the Hoosiers' Senior Day.

Again, Iowa should be favored in this one, but this one might not come easy.

5. Nov. 13 – at Northwestern

Like the Arizona game, this one is obvious, but for different reasons.

Never mind that this game (again) falls the week before that Iowa-Ohio State game at Kinnick Stadium that many feel could be epic. Northwestern has beaten the Hawkeyes the last two seasons in Iowa City, and has won four of its last five meetings with Iowa.

Just like the week before against Indiana, the Wildcats also moved their final home game against Illinois to Wrigley Field in Chicago, so this game is now Northwestern's Senior Day as

well.

As long as Pat Fitzgerald is coaching this team, it can't be overlooked. I understand Iowa doesn't view Northwestern as a rival in the same way Northwestern views Iowa, but this is still going to be a key game, especially if the Hawkeyes are 9-0 entering this one like they were last year's meeting with the Wildcats.

Now, don't get me wrong. Kirk Ferentz is going to preach to his team (as he does every season) the "one-game-at-a-time" mentality. Right now, the only game the players and coaches should be worrying about is Eastern Illinois, even if it is a game Iowa should win convincingly.

I call attention to those five games though because they are games where Iowa is going to be favored (more than likely), but given the familiarity with these opponents and how games against each of them went last season, these are contests that can't be overlooked by anyone.