

0-Line answers the call (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The No. 9 Iowa Hawkeyes went into their opener against Eastern Illinois with one burning question surrounding the offensive line. There was good reason for the concern.

Senior center Josh Koeppel was involved in an accident on Aug. 30 that could've easily taken his life. Junior Adam Gettis, who the coaching staff spoke strongly of in the preseason, was out with an injury.

In fact, sophomore James Ferentz, redshirt freshman Nolan MacMillan and junior Markus Zusevics all made their first career starts for the Hawkeyes on Saturday.

After a 37-7 win where the offense shined, the 0-Line proved to be pretty decent.

"I thought we felt really comfortable coming into the game," Ferentz said. "We were missing guys, but at the same time, I think everybody was ready to play."

The Hawkeyes produced scoring drives on their first two possessions of 65 and 56 yards, respectively. They both featured an imposing balance of running and throwing the football. Both possessions had three completions each from quarterback Ricky Stanzi. Both were finished off by touchdown runs from running back Adam Robinson.

Iowa found itself doing exactly what it wanted to do – start the game strong.

Robinson had every reason to be boastful about the offensive line afterwards. The 5-9 native of Des Moines finished with 24 carries for 109 yards on the ground, and three touchdown runs.

"They held their own," Robinson said. "I got a first-hand glimpse at them during the end of camp. I think that's when they really came together and meshed as a unit.

"I was just really excited to get behind them and run, and you see what happened. They opened up some great, big holes for me. I took advantage of it, and they are only getting better."

As for Stanzi, he went 18-of-23 passing for 229 yards and one touchdown. A lot of that came as a result of having time to see the field and distribute the football to anyone he saw open.

Like Robinson, he gave the offensive line credit for playing well, especially considering that Iowa implemented a game plan for Eastern Illinois that required strong communication with a group that was 60 percent new.

"Those guys have been dedicated to getting better," Stanzi said. "They did a great job of adjusting to playing in a ball game. That was new for a lot of those guys up front.

"James Ferentz did a great job of making all the calls. There were a lot of checks that had to be put in this game plan because of their defense."

Cohesion is critical to the success of an offensive line. That ability to work together and for one another was something veteran linemen such as senior Julian Vandervelde felt the guys up front did well against the Panthers' front four.

"We're getting a lot of good dialogue going back and forth," Vandervelde said. "It wasn't just the experienced guys like myself and Riley [Reiff] pointing stuff out to the other guys. It was everybody contributing."

Next up for the Hawkeyes is an Iowa State squad whose defense only surrendered 249 yards of total offense in a 27-10 win over Northern Illinois on Sept. 2. The Iowa offensive line knows its chemistry is strong, but also realizes the importance of carrying over whatever momentum it has after a stellar outing against Eastern Illinois.

“That first game is usually the toughest one for young players,” Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said. “It’s good for them to have that under their belt and we’ll have a little more confidence coming out next week.”