

9/6/2010: Iowa State "Film Study" (premium)

Every Monday throughout the course of the 2010 Iowa football season, we will have a weekly series titled "Film Study." In this series, we go back and watch the previous game of Iowa's upcoming opponent and put together a list of observations. This week, we examine the Iowa State Cyclones, who come to Kinnick Stadium on Sept. 11.

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Last weekend, after covering Iowa's 37-7 win over Eastern Illinois, I went back and watched Iowa State's 27-10 victory over Northern Illinois for the first time and watched in its entirety.

Below is a list of observations I made of the Cyclones from examining the game real closely:

Offense

What I saw from the offense was pretty much all shotgun the entire game, using three wide receivers and a tight end. A lot of it is based on reads, where quarterback Austen Arnaud either hands the ball off to running back Alexander Robinson and fakes running with it, or fakes the handoff to Robinson, takes off with the football, and goes.

The Iowa State offense goes as its offensive line goes, plain and simple. Robinson's best runs against the Huskies came when he got excellent blocking from the guys up front and managed to find open field to burst through. Arnaud's best decision-making came when the line did its job blocking and gave him time to throw.

But when the line had its bad moments, so did Arnaud and Robinson. Robinson had one fumble on a dump-off pass that was called a lateral, something I felt could've been debatable.

For the most part, Iowa State's O-Line fared well. Not too many penalties called on this unit.

Overall, I think Arnaud has become a better quarterback. Seeing how he's a fifth-year senior, you would hope this would be the case.

He completed 27-of-36 passes. Some of the incompletions, particularly ones on the Cyclones' opening drive, were a result of his receivers not hauling the football in. However, his two interceptions were ill-advised decisions on his part.

I honestly came away from watching this game more impressed with the Cyclones' tight end, Colin Franklin, and receiver Jake Williams. These seemed to be the two guys Arnaud was relying on, and for good reason. Franklin had five catches for 75 yards against Northern Illinois, while Williams finished with three catches and 28 receiving yards.

I wasn't too thrilled with Iowa State's receiving corps. There were a couple of penalties such as offensive pass interference, and specifically, an illegal formation penalty on an Arnaud touchdown run that was called back. Those are the types of penalties that are inexcusable from a coach's perspective.

Robinson had two touchdown runs, one of 63 yards where he found the hole and just was off to the races. The other was from five yards out, and a testament, again, to Iowa State's O-Line. Outside of those two touchdowns though, his other 17 carries only accumulated a total of 28 yards on the ground.

Defense

I'll start by saying that for all the talk about Iowa playing

a "bend, but don't break" defense, that was exactly what I saw from the Cyclones' defense in this game. It gave up a lot of short-yardage plays and Northern Illinois made some good adjustments offensively to start the second half. But when it needed to create turnovers, that's exactly what happened.

I did not come away impressed by Iowa State's front four. I felt the mistakes made by Northern Illinois were more mental lapses and things it didn't do. The Cyclones had some struggles stopping the run. In fact, the Huskies' first touchdown, which came in the fourth quarter, featured all but two plays where they ran inside the hashes. I didn't think the defensive line got much pressure on Northern Illinois' quarterback, and it shows statistically, as the Cyclone D-Line only recorded one sack. I thought he made some dumb mistakes that hurt his team.

Now I will say this: I was very impressed by Iowa State's linebackers. What makes this even more significant is that the two who really stood out in this game were both sophomores. A.J. Klein led the Cyclones with 15 tackles, and Jake Knott had two second-half interceptions, one off a tipped ball, the other he caught one-handed. Knott finished with nine tackles. Both linebackers had five solo tackles.

I thought the secondary was OK. It played well for the most part in the first half, and defensive back Zac Sandvig recorded an interception on the opening play of the second quarter. He made a great break on the ball and read the quarterback's eyes the whole way. Also had some help from Knott spying on the signal-caller.

But it began to get exposed a little bit, especially in the third quarter. Iowa State should feel a little fortunate that Northern Illinois missed on some potentially big plays that could have changed the complexion of the game.

I'm thinking the return of David Sims this week will be very

beneficial.

Special Teams

This area looked shaky. Iowa State only punted once the entire game, and it went 18 yards. That fourth-quarter shank was what led to Northern Illinois' lone touchdown drive. Kicker Grant Mahoney missed one field goal on the opening drive that he just missed by a wide margin. The snap and hold were both good.

On kickoffs, I noticed Mahoney's leg got stronger as the game wore on, and kickoff coverage in general seemed to be OK.

There wasn't much to observe in the return game for Iowa State.

Coaching

Overall, I thought Paul Rhoads and his staff did a pretty solid job of coaching this game and getting the team ready. The O-Line and linebackers looked strong, and his defense made plays when it needed to.

One thing he did do in this game, right before halftime, was call two timeouts to ice Northern Illinois' kicker, who proceeded to miss a field goal on the final play of the first half. This is worth noting considering the kicking situation with Iowa.

Strengths

- Speed of Arnaud and Robinson when the O-Line creates lanes to run through*
- Franklin has solid hands for a tight end*
- Linebacking corps very productive*

Weaknesses

- *D-Line not getting enough pressure*
- *Inconsistent play from offense/inexcusable penalties*
- *Shaky special teams play*

Final Thoughts

Now you probably just read all this and began wondering how this all plays out for Iowa. First, I would stress that this is based off one game.

That said, I think Iowa can have some success running the football, especially up the middle. Guys like Julian Vandervelde, James Ferentz, and Nolan MacMillan in particular, all need to play well.

Ricky Stanzi needs to make good decisions with the football in order for Iowa to win. Northern Illinois' quarterback did not do this, and it hurt the Huskie offense last week. Stanzi showed last week against Eastern Illinois that he has improved his mechanics and making better reads.

I feel like Iowa State's defense is going to give Iowa room to work with, so it's important from the Hawkeyes' standpoint to utilize the entire field and keep possession of the football. Once the safeties creep up, that's when the Iowa receivers can beat Iowa State cornerbacks down the sidelines.

Defensively, Iowa's front four needs to win the battle of wills in the trenches. Again, I thought the Cyclones' offensive line played well for the most part against Northern Illinois. If it can do that, not only will Robinson struggle to find holes to run through, but it could also lead Arnaud into making poor decisions with the football like he did last year, when Tyler Sash and Brett Greenwood combined for five interceptions.

Call me crazy, but it might be to Iowa's benefit to start this game on defense. If the Hawkeye defense can force a three-and-

out on the opening series, that could lead to pressure being then placed on Iowa State's defense. Keep in mind, Northern Illinois was able to move the ball on its opening series, but like the Cyclones, it also missed a field goal on the opening possession.

To me, the bottom line is this game is going to be decided by turnovers, and specifically, the play of the two fifth-year senior quarterbacks. The quarterback with the fewer interceptions on Saturday is going to be holding the Cy-Hawk Trophy up with his teammates after the game.

Arnaud needs to play the best game of his career for Iowa State to have a chance at upsetting the Hawkeyes. Likewise, Stanzi needs to build off his solid performance last week against Eastern Illinois.

I think Iowa wins, and probably by double digits. But I also think Iowa State is going to make this year's contest much more interesting than the one at Jack Trice Stadium in 2009.