

Commentary: It doesn't matter which running back starts (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – After seeing No. 9 Iowa unleash its 1-2 punch of sophomore running backs Adam Robinson and Jewel Hampton against Iowa State on Saturday, I came to this conclusion:

Who cares which one of these guys starts? Seriously.

It doesn't matter.

Robinson got the coveted start on Saturday. Considering how he had 109 yards rushing and three touchdowns against Eastern Illinois on Sept. 4, the Des Moines native did nothing to lose that starting job.

After amassing 156 yards on 14 carries in the 35-7 victory over the Cyclones, there's no reason to think he won't start next week against Arizona either.

Jewel Hampton made his first appearance for the Hawkeyes in a game since Iowa won the 2009 Outback Bowl. That day, he was behind Shonn Greene on the 2-deep.

After missing all of 2009 with a torn ACL, after being suspended last week because of trouble with the law this past summer, Hampton returned on Saturday. He had 20 carries for 84 yards and had a two-yard touchdown run.

In fact, his first series of the game was when Hampton scored. It capped a 16-play drive where the Indianapolis, Ind., native

touched the football 11 times.

Let's make something clear: There is absolutely no running back controversy on this team.

It doesn't matter which one of these two is on the field. Both showed a knack for finding holes, following their lead blockers, being physical, and showing breakaway speed.

This is like the days of Albert Young and Damian Sims being in the Hawkeye backfield. In fact, it might be even better.

The comparison to that aforementioned duo was made earlier in the week. I think there's one major difference, however. Any contrasts that exist between Robinson and Hampton are minute.

There was always a difference between Young and Sims. Young was more powerful, while Sims was faster. Hampton, in 2008, was nothing close to the same type of back Greene was.

Even last season, Robinson proved to be more of a grind-it-out running back than Brandon Wegher was.

This isn't the same as quarterback. If there's an ongoing battle for the starting quarterback, that's a dilemma that could have a negative effect on the team and on fans (as was proven in 2008 when Ricky Stanzi ultimately beat out Jake Christensen).

As far as I'm concerned, I think Hawkeye fans ought to embrace the fact that both Robinson and Hampton are at the offense's disposal in 2010.

Let's just say for argument's sake one of them does suffer a serious injury at some point this season. Guess what? That other back is right there, ready to go. As a result, the offense doesn't miss a beat, and it adds to the "Next Man In" legacy fans in the Hawkeye State have grown to appreciate during the Kirk Ferentz era.

There are going to be days when Robinson outperforms Hampton. There will be days when it's vice versa.

And then there's something like what was witnessed by 70,585 on Saturday, where both running backs contributed heavily.

One thing both Robinson and Hampton not only discussed, but mentioned embracing after the game, was how they were used. Robinson started the game and played on the Hawkeyes' opening drive. The next series was when Hampton came in.

The two went back and forth all afternoon.

If Iowa's offense is going to stay consistent, it will need both guys. If Robinson and Hampton are providing any sort of balance in the run game, that Hawkeye offense is going to wear opponents out every single week. The more effective the ground game is, the more frustrated opposing defenses get.

My message for Hawkeye fans after Saturday is this: Assuming both Robinson and Hampton stay healthy, don't lose any sleep over which one is listed above the other on the weekly two-deeps.

Because like "The Rock" says, "it doesn't matter."